



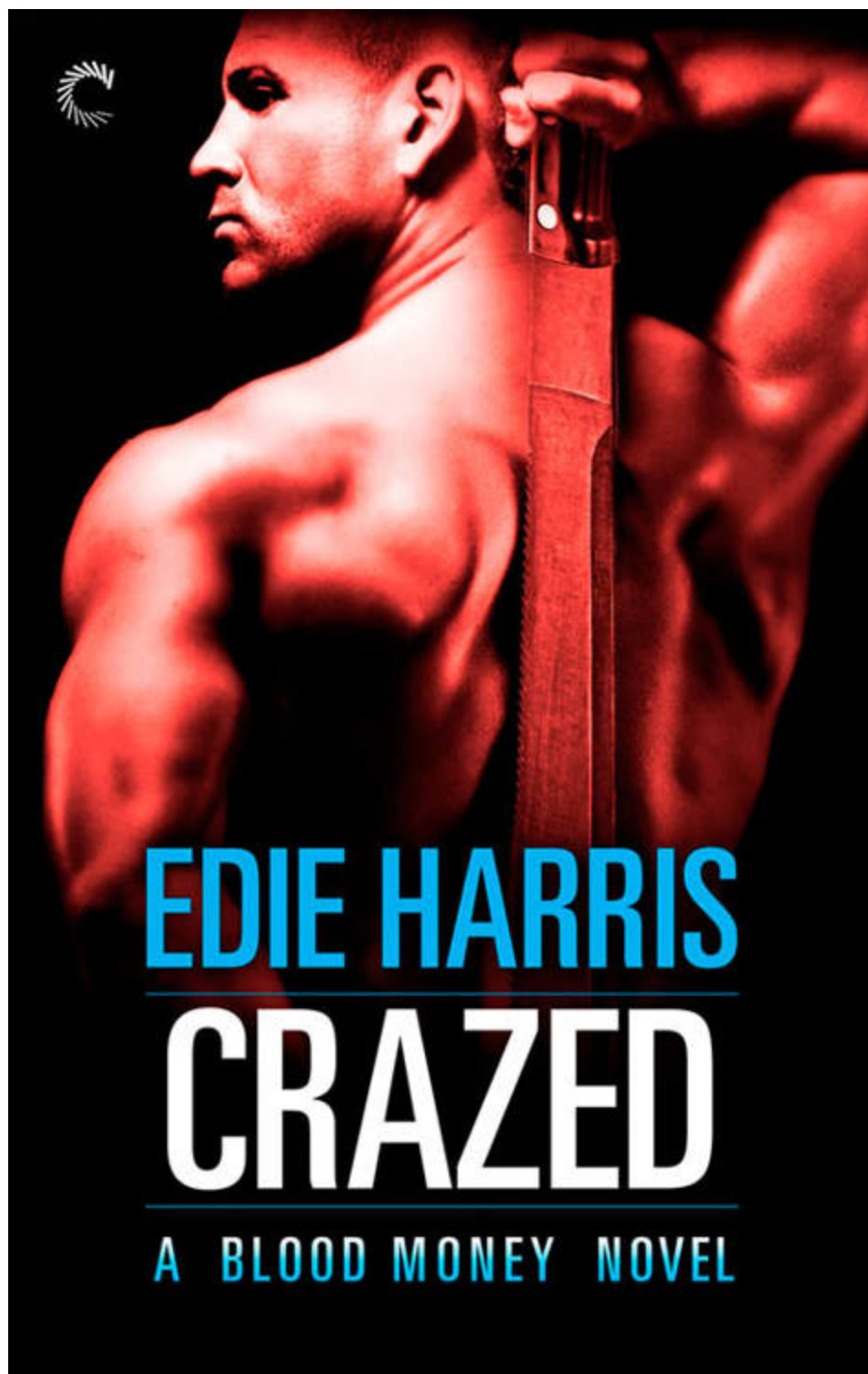
**EDIE HARRIS**

---

**CRAZED**

---

**A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL**



**EDIE HARRIS**

**CRAZED**

**A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Crazed: A Blood Money Novel By Edie Harris*

Casey Faraday was a soldier before he was a spy, but family always came first, no matter what.

When a member of the Faraday clan is snatched off the streets and dragged halfway across the world, it's Casey who follows the kidnappers' trail to South America. Thrust into the heart of the cartel he barely escaped during an undercover assignment four years earlier, he's unprepared for the shock awaiting him on Colombian soil.

Ilda Almeida—the only woman to ever tempt Casey into madness, the beautiful wife he'd mourned for years—is very much alive. And keeping a secret that will forever change life as he knows it.

Casey can't control his hands—or his heart—around Ilda, but neither can he abandon his rescue mission. When cartel violence turns the jungle into a bloodbath, he can only protect one family: his.

*Book three of the Blood Money series*

Edited by Kerri Buckley.

**79,870 words**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Dear Reader,

It's officially 2016! In the publishing world, we've been talking in terms of 2016 for over a year by the time it gets here, due to the amount of time some books are scheduled in advance. So for us, 2016 already feels like it's been around for quite some time. And, of course, we absolutely already have 2017 and 2018 in our planners, and even though it messes with our brains to be thinking in terms of 2018, it's great news for you since it means there will always be new books to read!

This January, as always, we start our Carina Press release schedule as we mean to continue the year—with a mix of science fiction, historical, male/male and suspense romance, as well as a romantic mystery and an urban fantasy thrown in.

A kidnapping forces an ex-CIA operative back into the violence of a Colombian cartel, where he finds the wife he believed dead to be very much alive—and hiding a dangerous secret in this romantic suspense novel by Edie Harris. Pick up [Crazed: A Blood Money Novel](#) this January, and then catch up on her other romantic suspense titles, [Blamed](#) and [Ripped](#).

The Carina Press acquisitions team bonded over our love of [A Duchess in Name](#), a historical romance from Amanda Weaver that kicks off her Grantham Girls trilogy. A wild passion unexpectedly blossoms out of the arranged marriage of the Earl of Dunnley and American heiress Victoria Carson, but will the lies that bound them in marriage finally tear them apart?

It's time for another installment of the kick-ass and romantic male/male space opera series Chaos Station from Kelly Jensen and Jenn Burke. In [Inversion Point](#), Zander and Felix have to find a way to face their doubts and preserve their love—while preventing another galaxy-wide war.

Are you ready for a mystery with a side of romance? When Detroit criminal defender duo Issabella Bright and Darren Fletcher are summoned to the island estate of a retired judge, a deadly chain of events is set in motion—

one involving murder, stolen World War II treasures and a conspiracy of revenge that stretches all the way to Chicago, where Darren's brother Luther wields their family's power with cold, ruthless precision. Buy Jonathan Watkins's [\*Isolated Judgment\*](#), or go back to where the Bright & Fletcher mystery series began with [\*Motor City Shakedown\*](#) and [\*Dying in Detroit\*](#).

Whoever said "violence is a last resort" never had a Minotaur for a best friend. We're pleased to welcome back Joshua Roots with his newest urban fantasy, [\*Paranormal Chaos\*](#). Warlock Marcus Shifter has been sent on the most dangerous mission of his career: travel to the remote Minotaur nation and convince them not to abandon the tenuous peace agreement between the humans and the paranormals.

Coming in February 2016: A male/male new-adult romance from K.A. Mitchell, Nico Rosso begins a thrilling new romantic suspense series with a hero you will love, we introduce new author Anna del Mar with her sexy romantic suspense, Lauren Dane re-releases a fan favorite, and so much more!

In the meantime, I wish you the very happiest of years as we travel into 2016. May your year be blessed with nothing but good books, memorable characters, and many, many happy-book-sigh moments as you read the last page.

As always, until next month, here's wishing you a wonderful month of books you love, remember and recommend.

Happy reading!

~Angela James  
Executive Editor, Carina Press

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## **Dedication**

For Jess, the most compassionate, resilient woman I've ever met, and her amazing son, Max.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# **Contents**

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\*Life in Death: The Faraday Story\*](#)

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)



“It is curious that physical courage should be so common in  
the world and moral courage so rare.”

—Mark Twain

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *Prologue*

The blow from behind sent him to his knees, dirt and dust clouding up around him as he skidded into the street. Noise from the club filtered out before the door slammed shut, and Casey rolled with a grunt, gaining his feet a split second before the air between him and his assailant filled with curses.

Curses, and the wicked blade of Manuel Dias's machete.

Casey dodged to the side, reaching for his 9mm, but the machete caught him along his dominant arm, slicing through several layers of skin to draw blood. "What the hell, man?" He shook out his arm as he retreated deeper into the street, testing for muscle and tendon damage, but other than hurting like a sonofabitch, his limb appeared to be functioning.

A violent gleam entered Manuel's dark eyes, but the man said nothing as he stalked closer.

Again, Casey moved to pull his gun from where it was tucked into the back waistband of his cargos, but then Manuel was there, his meaty fist crashing into Casey's jaw and causing his ears to ring. Another blow caught him in his gut, hard enough that nausea threatened, and enough was enough.

Screw his cover identity. Screw this overgrown thug. Screw being fucking *subtle*. The time for subtlety was over, and he was going to burn this goddamn country to the ground.

Keeping his body bent, he waited for Manuel to set himself for another punch, then lunged. Locking his arms around his attacker's rib cage, Casey drove Manuel to the ground, another dust cloud rising around them.

*Disarm.* Priority number one, and now that Casey wasn't playing, he made quick work of ridding Manuel of the machete. He pounded his fist into the sensitive nerves of Manuel's inner wrist, once, twice, until Manuel's fingers spasmed into numbness. Casey snatched up the machete, shifted his weight until his knees pinned Manuel's shoulders to the dirt and backhanded him across his smug, silent face.

As Manuel spat blood, Casey finally got his gun in hand and pressed the muzzle to Manuel's sweating temple. For the first time in his life, he felt

like the thug he'd pretended to be for so long. The Marin cartel had infiltrated his veins, after all these years, and Casey allowed the tainted power to sweep through him as he tilted his grip.

This was what it felt like to not think about consequences, or responsibilities. In this moment, he was a lone wolf and a gangbanger and a criminal and vigilante justice, and he didn't need Manuel to say a damn word. He knew the man's wrongdoings, and right now, with a pistol in one hand and a bloody machete in the other, Casey embraced the role of judge, jury and executioner.

It was his *right*, goddamn it. His sacrifices, the pain and grief and guilt he'd carried for so long, had earned him this moment in time, his finger one second away from pulling the trigger and getting the hell on with his life. He wouldn't lose a minute of sleep over killing Manuel.

*So why isn't he dead yet?*

"Why are you coming after me, Manuel? Huh?" The muzzle dug in harder. "Who set you on my ass tonight?" Not that it took a genius, but Casey needed to hear it.

"Pipe." Blood stained the corner of Manuel's mouth, his teeth as he bared them in the faint glow of the streetlamp. "He knows." His gaze flicked to the door of the club, tellingly. "He *knows*, Casey Faraday."

Fear spiraled, and it had nothing to do with his actual name on Manuel's lips. Pipe knew, and that meant—"So I'm a dead man, then?" He switched the gun from temple to forehead, levering his weight more firmly into Manuel's shoulders. "Tough luck, asshole." So long as it was only his life in the crosshairs, okay, they could deal, but the sinister glee in Manuel's voice filled him with dread.

Dread that tripled when Manuel wheezed out a laugh. "You're a dead man, and *she* is a dead woman." He grimaced, coughing wetly. "Finally, she'll be gone."

Casey felt the final tethers on his humanity snap. Launching to his feet, he pocketed his gun and grabbed Manuel by his shirtfront, slamming him to his hands and knees. As Manuel straightened, his movements pained and slow, Casey shifted his hold on the machete and fisted a handful of Manuel's greasy hair, yanking him up into kneeling submission.

Blood coated his forearm. Dust clogged every pore. His knuckles throbbed, his gut ached, and his jaw stiffened and swelled with every

passing moment. None of that mattered—nothing about his body had ever mattered outside of what he could do for *her*. Protecting her. Loving her. And this fucker already had a target affixed to her back?

Oh, *hell* no.

Feral adrenaline spiked his bloodstream as he let the sharp edge of the machete's blade rest along Manuel's jugular. "If I were my brother," he said, switching from Spanish to his native English, enjoying the way Manuel's eyes narrowed, as if the man hadn't quite expected him to give up the ghost, after all, "I'd inform you that you've just fatally miscalculated. But I'm not my brother." He dug the blade a little deeper and watched blood well with grim satisfaction. "So you've got one shot left to pit-stop in purgatory on your way to hell. Tell me who's after her, since it's certainly not going to be you in about ten seconds."

If he knew who Manuel had tagged to take her out, he could warn her.

Maybe...maybe he could save her.

Manuel bared his teeth, said nothing and sealed his fate.

"Wrong fucking answer, Manuel." Hefting the machete in his hand, he tightened his grip and drew his arm back, ready to swing true. "You should know better than to threaten a bad man's wife."

# Chapter One

*One Week Earlier*  
*Boston*

Casey Faraday was sick and fucking tired of watching his family come to harm.

He paced the cobblestone alley from which his youngest brother, Adam, had been kidnapped barely an hour earlier. He'd already called in a few quiet favors with nearby airports and local authorities, floating Adam's description—*twenty-six years old, five-eleven, athletic build, shaggy brown hair, gray eyes, darker skin, probably wearing a T-shirt with some sort of nerdy pop-culture reference, likely in the company of three men of Latin descent*—and asking for a direct call if he was spotted.

That was the key detail Adam had managed to share with Casey before the fighting broke out. Fighting Casey had heard with too much clarity from the other end of the phone; Adam had left the line open during the struggle, keeping up a running dialogue and trying to give Casey as much information as possible to go on, the stupid little genius.

*“Cuándo la última vez que fue a la confesión, amigo? I haven't been to mass in...ever.”*

Followed by, *“Three against one, and all more jacked than me. You dudes have a bullshit concept of what constitutes a fair fight.”*

*“Ugly motherfuckers. Island shirts and board shorts? This is Boston, assholes.”*

And then, *“Come at me, lefty. Come at m—oof.”* What sounded like a gut punch, and Adam's wheezing breaths as a scuffle ensued, more flesh-on-flesh strikes before the call had abruptly ended.

Casey's heart had stopped during that dead air.

*“Hey, boss.”* Hand outstretched, Finn crossed the alley to where Casey stood. In his palm was a slim cell phone with a cracked screen. Adam's. *“Found this around the corner, at the Hanover Street intersection. Bastards probably had a vehicle waiting.”*

As the director of Tactical Operations, Casey liked hiring ex-military, as evidenced by former Marine medic Finn and his partner, Henry, an Air Force officer, who'd served alongside Faraday Industries' private pilot, Captain Reid Okumura. Part of it was Casey's service history as a Combat Applications Group sergeant in the US Army—he just inherently trusted fellow soldiers more than civilians. They followed orders, kicked ass and never flinched under fire.

Casey took Adam's phone from Finn's grasp, touched the power button. The broken screen flickered to life, demanding a passcode. He'd have to add it to the rest of the busted hardware he needed Della Quinn's special touch to repair. Of course, cousin Della—until recently Adam's second-in-command—had relocated to the new Faraday Chicago location as of that very morning, so a trip to the Midwest was in order, probably as soon as he finished here. “I have yet to see a working camera monitoring this alley.”

“Traffic cams on the intersections are all functional, though,” Henry told him. Meaning they could maybe get an image of the vehicle Adam was taken in. “Do you want to go the legal route and make a request of BPD, or do we hack the footage ourselves?”

Casey grunted, for once not sure how to answer. Usually he'd go the less-than-legal route...but it was Adam who he'd demand do the hacking. The Faradays weren't necessarily on great terms with the Boston Police Department, either. “Let me think on it.”

Glancing around the alley again, his penlight dancing from one dark, dirty corner to the next, he realized he barely needed any footage of this place to know what happened. Adam's back had been to the rear door of the Thai restaurant, where he'd hidden a messenger bag filled with the tablet and external hard drive he had deliberately broken prior to the fight—anything to prevent crucial Faraday intel from falling into enemy hands. That messenger bag was now slung across Casey's shoulders.

Displaced dirt and puddle splashes indicated what path the fighting had taken, and the two distinct sets of blood splatter, evident beneath the glare of Casey's light, told him Adam had gotten in at least one solid hit. “Finn? We got blood.”

Immediately, the medic was at his side, tugging out his kit to sample the two sprays. Letting him work, Casey rose to walk to the end of the alley,

Henry falling in next to him. “Made up your mind about the traffic cam footage yet?” the former lieutenant asked.

“Did Finn kiss and make up with Jaime Redding yet?” The supervising detective of BPD’s Forensic Technology Division had a long history of naming Finn as his personal nemesis, and until Finn cleared the air with Redding, it was highly unlikely the man would do Faraday Industries any favors, such as pulling footage files.

Henry sniggered. “Nope.”

Casey sighed. “Then I’ll add it to the list of shit I need Della to do before she sleeps tonight.”

“Didn’t she *just* get to Chicago, like, today?”

“She’s an hour behind now. Gives her more time to get shit done.”

“You’re a sadist.”

“And yet you still work for me.”

“Never said *I* wasn’t a masochist.”

Somehow finding the ability to chuckle, Casey paused at the mouth of the alley and stared out at the nearby intersection. On his phone, he made note of the street names and the locations of the red-light cameras. Finn walked up behind them, DNA evidence safely stowed in his kit. “Got what you need?”

“Yup.” Finn paused. “Did I hear you mention Redding?”

Another snicker from Henry, but Casey was done laughing. “Fix whatever you broke with the detective, buddy. Your little feud has finally interfered with my life, which means I’ve lost patience.”

“He’s the one who dumped my baby sister,” Finn grumbled.

“I can’t even tell you how much I *do not care* right now.” He didn’t mean to snap the words, but each second he stood there, crafting and discarding possible plans, the farther away Adam got from him, from home.

Finn instantly sobered. “I’ll go back to the compound and run these samples, see what pops up. Henry?”

Car keys jangled in Henry’s hand. “I’m driving. There’s nothing else we can do onsite, right, boss?”

Sad but true. “Listen up. This situation with Adam goes no further than us.”

“You mean—”

“Not to Frank,” he told them, naming his father, the intimidating Faraday patriarch. “Not to my mom. Not to anyone but myself or Tobias.” His other brother, the company’s chief counsel and financial officer, was about to get a call from Casey, anyway, so he’d know soon enough. “There’s no need to worry my parents unnecessarily.”

Though he could tell Henry and Finn disagreed with his decision, they didn’t naysay him, instead nodding their goodbyes and slipping around the corner to where they’d parked minutes after Adam had disappeared.

With a heavy sigh, his chest weighted by rage and fear and sorrow, Casey stalked the length of the alley once more, making certain he hadn’t missed a single clue. Unfortunately, there weren’t many clues to begin with, and his heart sank deeper into a miasma of negative emotion. Yes, he was damn tired of the bull’s-eye apparently fixed on his siblings. He’d need to take stronger measures to erase it.

Gripping the strap of Adam’s abandoned bag in one hand, he exited the alley and pulled out his phone. But before he could dial Tobias, a surprised feminine voice called out to him. “Casey?”

He paused, turning, and caught sight of a tall blonde woman obviously on her way to the bar scene a few blocks over, a group of equally dressed-up women gaggling around her on the sidewalk. “Hey, Sara.” For a week or two a while back, they’d hooked up. Casual, easy, a non-demanding interlude of physical catharsis. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been good.” Sara sauntered closer after giving her girlfriends the signal to wait. Her smile was pretty, friendly. “You look great.”

“So do you.” And she did. Model-slim and in her early thirties, Sara carried herself with poise and confidence, a confidence that had led her to approach Casey in a Boston bar nearly a year ago. He’d liked her confidence, and hadn’t been threatened by the possibility that he might end up having deeper feelings for her, so he’d rolled with her flirting and enjoyed their time between the sheets.

But he could tell by the gleam in her blue eyes now that she was ready and willing to pick up that flirting right where they’d left off, and tonight was...not the night for that. Even if his brother hadn’t just been kidnapped, it wouldn’t have been the right night for it—the demons had been nipping at his heels lately, invading his dreams, and that meant he wasn’t fit company for anyone, not on an intimate level. “I’m sorry,” he said with a regretful



shake of his head, though regret wasn't what he was feeling, no matter that Sara was a perfectly nice woman. "I wish I had time to talk, but I've got a family thing." He softened the apology with a half smile, relieved when she shrugged, her smile not faltering.

"No big deal. You've got my number." She shifted back in step with the other women. "Call me sometime." Sara and her friends moved along down the sidewalk, deeper into the heart of Haymarket, and any guilt Casey may have felt about shutting her down disappeared. A woman as great as Sara would never want for male attention, and she could do a helluva lot better than him, that was for damn sure.

Heading in the opposite direction, he pulled up Tobias's number, not caring that it was one in the morning in London.

Tobias answered on the third ring. "Casey." That was it—no chastisement, no frustration, just his cool voice ready to handle whatever new problem was thrown his way.

And Casey found himself at a loss for words. He didn't know how to tell his brother about Adam. Didn't know how to confess that another of their siblings had been targeted and harmed. After what Beth had been through a few months ago, and the danger Tobias himself had faced at the hands of the Russian mob, Casey knew they were all ready for things to be calm for a while. "Tobias," he began, but his voice cracked, croaked.

Immediately, Tobias went on the alert. "What's wrong?"

"Adam. He's been taken." Quickly recounting the known details and the steps he'd already taken, he unlocked his vehicle and locked himself in, shoving the key into the ignition and peeling away from the curb, heading for home.

Bluetooth kicked in and Tobias's tense tones filled the interior of the Jeep. "We meet at Beth's, then. You need Della to get inside the hardware Adam left behind."

"Family meeting?" Family was the five of them, their core unit, and now that the unit was missing a key member, a meeting was a necessity.

"Yes," Tobias agreed tightly. "We get Gillian on a secure video link, and then..."

The fine hairs on Casey's forearms rose. "Then *what?*"

A controlled exhalation from the other end of the line. "Then I tell you what I had Adam investigating, off the books."

Anger flashed, ping-ponging between Casey's temples before he breathed through the rush of emotion. He knew better than to loosen the white-knuckled fist he kept clenched around the more violent of his feelings, not when his dark days outnumbered the light as of late. Plus, he couldn't afford to be mad at Tobias. "You had him working on something and didn't loop me in?" Well, would you look at that—some of the mad seeped through anyway.

"I'm not discussing it over the phone, Casey. But I promise you'll hear it all when we get to Chicago."

We. "Chandler's coming?" Chandler McCallister, the formerly disavowed British spy who had double-oh-seven'd her way into Tobias's heart this spring. Tobias had recently bought a flat in the city and planned to make the UK his home base, in order to be with her. Casey had been on the fence about the tiny blonde dynamo, but after the shit that went down in Russia and learning how bravely—and ingeniously—she'd saved Tobias's life from a truly terrifying Moscow mobster, he had mad respect for his brother's beloved. Putting her in the same room as Beth, however... "Has she talked to Beth or Vick since the, uh, incident?"

"No, but it has to happen sometime, and Adam's kidnapping means 'sometime' has arrived." His brother's statement was harsh and unforgiving. "Faradays are being hunted, Casey. We won't survive infighting."

That was the truth. "The plane's here, so you two are on your own getting to Chicago."

"We'll manage. I'll send you the details when I have them." There was a pause. "Casey?"

Yeah. He understood the rage in Tobias's voice, all too well. "We get Adam back, and then we do the hunting." The call disconnected with a press of a button on the steering wheel, Casey's fingers flexing as he sped out of the city. He tried to remember the breathing exercises he'd been taught, the ones that were supposed to help him manage the more high-strung of his emotions, but more often than not the exercises failed.

Casey was a high-strung kind of guy, always had been. Some diaphragmatic breathing wasn't going to change that.

A quick call to the pilot was next, the jet needing to be ready within the hour, and he hung up as he approached the Faraday property line. Waving to

the security guard, he drove through the open gate, up the winding drive that extended nearly half a mile onto Faraday land. The compound, as it had been called for generations, housed not only the original eighteenth-century Faraday homestead, but also a large converted warehouse, a tricked-out barracks-style dormitory, two centuries-old barns—one in good repair, one decrepit—one multilevel garage, two cottages, two cabins, a state-of-the-art recreation facility complete with climbing wall, lounge and movie theater and lap pool, and the Queen Anne Victorian mansion in which Casey had been raised. Technically, one of the cabins was his to use, but lately, whenever he'd been stateside, he'd found himself crashing in his childhood bedroom.

He ditched his vehicle in the garage, pausing to request a ride from the family chauffeur in fifteen minutes' time, and hauled ass to the house, heading straight for his bedroom on the second floor. He'd long ago taken down the movie posters for *Escape from New York* and *Big Trouble in Little China*, and other Kurt Russell flicks that had decorated his walls when he was a kid. No trophies on display, no athletics awards, because Casey hadn't participated in any team sports other than the casual pick-ups played by Faraday employees on the secured compound. Part and parcel of being homeschooled, he supposed, but the lack of camaraderie, the lack of a tangible physical outlet had made him incredibly eager once he turned eighteen and enlisted.

He'd been so ready to be a team player and leave the farm team for the big leagues. He hadn't realized until later that Faraday Industries was the majors, just utilizing a different playbook.

Hauling a duffel from the closet, he tossed in a spare set of boots, a weapons kit from under the bed, the travel toiletries bag he kept atop the dresser, and a week's worth of boxer-briefs, socks and shirts. Cargo pants and an extra belt joined the gear, and then, quickly, he tucked Adam's messenger bag with the broken tech inside before situating an all-weather jacket and baseball cap over top and obscuring an immediate visual, if someone peeked inside. Someone like—

“Where's the fire?”

Ignoring the faint tension that particular voice instilled in him, Casey turned to face his father. “Hey, Dad.”

Frank Faraday, the figurehead CEO of Faraday Industries, sat in his electric wheelchair at the door to Casey's room, his line-worn face looking as displeased as usual. In the decade-plus since his multiple sclerosis diagnosis, Frank's stocky frame had lost much of its formerly muscled mass, his blond hair now completely gray and his blue eyes muted by the pain he lived with on a daily basis. The once-imposing patriarch's legs had lost most of their functionality only in recent years, relegating him to the chair his children knew he hated.

There was no set expiration date for Frank, not that they'd been told, but his deterioration had been swift of late, though noticeable only to the few people the older man still permitted within his orbit. That circle grew smaller every day, but Casey found he didn't have the heart to challenge Frank, to demand he not shut out those who cared for him. The grouchy old man was a pill, undeniably so. "I said, where's the fire?"

Case in point. "No fire." He fought to keep his tone neutral as he stuck to the narrative he and Tobias had agreed upon. "I'm heading to Chicago, gonna give Vick some oversight. Spend time with Bethie." Tossing in one last shirt, he zipped the duffel closed, placing one hand atop it as he waited, waited—

"It was my idea to open a satellite office in Chicago, you know. I should be the one checking up on Elisabeth and her...man-friend."

Yup. There it was. "Fiancé. Vick is her fiancé." The news of their announcement, brimming with quiet happiness, had come a couple of weeks ago, shortly after Beth and Vick had moved into their new house. It might seem as though things were moving quickly between the two of them, but Casey knew better. Time was irrelevant when you were with the right person, and those two were definitely each other's right person. "And no one's saying you can't check on the new office. But you do know Beth's not working it, right? This is all Vick's show."

"I know, I know," Frank grumbled. "She'll come back to us eventually."

Casey bit his tongue to forestall his argument. Beth had already come back to the family, just not to the business, and there was a difference—a difference Casey and the rest of the family were happy with. Frank's happiness, however, was a foreign, fleeting thing. "Do you wanna come along or not?"

Scowling, Frank's hand clenched atop the steering mechanism embedded in the right arm of the chair. "Not. Can't just drop everything and hop a plane anymore, can I?" Bitterness threaded through the gruff words, and Casey fought the wave of pity that threatened. Frank's pissy attitude had been around far longer than his illness, something it behooved all his children to remember.

Clearing his throat, Casey shouldered the duffel and walked to the door, meeting his father's gaze dead-on. "Look, you don't have to say it, but I know you signed off on a Chicago office and put Raleigh Vick in charge for Beth's sake. You want her to feel safe in the city she loves, with the man she loves. You did this for her." He knew the begrudging gift Frank had given Beth with what they now termed Faraday Chicago, but Beth, still healing from her scars, might not recognize precisely what it was their father had done. Not when such generosity was a rarity.

For a long moment, Frank said nothing. "Family first, Casey. Family first." Then he nudged the chair backward with a flick of his fingers, retreating down the hallway until he disappeared around the corner.

With a shake of his head, Casey turned in the opposite direction, heading for his mother's second-floor office, hoping to say goodbye to Sofia before hitting the road, but she was nowhere to be found. After scribbling a note to her—*Going to see Bethie. Will give her your love. xo C*—he hustled down the stairs and out the front door, where a black sedan waited just beyond the steps of the sprawling front porch, idling in the circle drive.

Tossing his duffel onto the back seat next to him, he nodded to his parents' driver, and minutes later the car had passed through the security gate at the edge of the compound, heading toward the nearby private airstrip where Captain Okumura waited with the company jet. Tobias probably hated that he'd have to charter a flight, but so what? It wasn't like Casey could bring the gear he needed onto a commercial plane. Scan him—or his luggage—and TSA would get real concerned, real fast.

With a heavy exhalation, he pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the messages waiting for him. A note from Finn saying he'd groveled at Jaime Redding's feet and they'd have red-light cam footage within the next two hours. A text from Henry confirming that Finn had, in fact, done said groveling. Tobias's ETA in Chicago. A shit-ton of memos from Casey's executive assistant reminding him that he had a full schedule

this week of outfitting his team in new body armor, field-testing some of Gillian's latest firearms and the dreaded quarterly psych evals.

Casey hadn't always dreaded those sessions. Ten years ago, he'd been twenty-four, debating how long he might stay with the Army before transitioning fully into the family business, tempted by the recruitment offers he'd received from the CIA and completely unconcerned about the state of his mind. Initially instituted to protect Beth when she first started taking on wetwork assignments, evaluations with the on-staff psychiatrist became de rigueur for any and all active field operatives.

But after coming back from Colombia four years earlier...yeah, he wasn't exactly a fan of someone digging around his psyche anymore. He faked it, plain and simple. He pretended things were A-okay, said all the right things and just enough of the wrong things to avert major suspicion that he was feeding the shrink a line. But things weren't okay, not really. Not even close.

Glancing down again, he realized he'd tapped open the photo app on his phone—and not only that, but navigated his way into the private album he kept dragged to the bottom of the list, only looking at it in his darkest moments.

There had been a lot of darkest moments lately.

His thumb hovered over the image filling his screen. A round face with golden-brown skin, flushed cheeks and the widest, whitest smile he'd ever seen. Untamed curls falling riotously over slim shoulders, her hand lifted in front of her, palm out, as if to ward off the camera. Big brown eyes, so dark a man could get lost in their depths, stared back at him, lifting at the corners in the faintest of crinkles as she laughed at the photographer. At him.

Ilda Almeida had been the most beautiful individual Casey had ever met, inside and out. And she was dead, leaving him a secret widower and unable to tell a damn soul how her loss made him ache on the insides of his bones.

He turned off the phone. Fucking demons.

## *Chapter Two*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *Chicago*

Tobias took the teacup and saucer his brother-in-law-to-be, Raleigh Vick, offered him, nodding his thanks as he leaned back in the leather club chair. Thankfully, the contents of the delicate porcelain weren't tea but coffee, with enough of a kick to rev Tobias's brain into high speed.

His fiancée was handed tea, however. The British were weird.

Chandler McCallister didn't take a seat as she sipped her morning beverage, standing tense and alert next to him. Her hip brushed his shoulder, and the warmth from that contact worked better than any caffeine burst. Settling his saucer on the clouded glass side table at his left, he shifted to grip the back of Chandler's thigh, his fingers slipping over the slick stretch fabric of her black jodhpur pants. He stroked the subtle seam running the length of her inner thigh, not saying a word, because they were being watched.

Not overtly, of course, but Tobias was aware of every cautious glance directed their way. Unsurprising, seeing as this was the first time Chandler had been in this particular group's company since the February night Beth was taken and subsequently tortured, nearly to death. Since then, Chandler had proven not to be the evil accomplice the Faradays had initially believed her, but the tension lingered.

Still, she was the woman Tobias loved, the woman he needed to get through each day, and he and his siblings were going to have to get over this uncomfortable hurdle, sooner or later.

The situation with Adam necessitated the former.

Beth lounged on the couch across from Tobias's seat, her hands wrapped around a giant mug of steaming coffee. Her short dark hair was growing out quickly, he noted, curling around her ears and brushing her forehead. Her head had been shaved during her ordeal, and Tobias—and the rest of the family—was relieved to see one of the most obvious outward signs of trauma fading. The scars on her arms, pale pink against the dusky gold of her natural skin tone, were also fading, more slowly than any of them would like, similar to the marks on her calves. Marks the entire room could see because of the sleeveless navy sheath dress she wore.

It was a deliberate outfit choice, Tobias knew, and though his heart hurt—for Beth, for Chandler—he understood. His sister wanted his lover to see



the damage inflicted by John Nash, Chandler's former MI6 partner, wanted Chandler to know she was strong enough to not only survive that torment but to thrive in its wake. That dress was a pointed message: *I won*.

But Beth's weren't the only pair of eyes on them. On the large flat-screen mounted over the living room fireplace, his other sister, Gillian, stared at the gathering with avid interest. It was early in San Diego, before sunrise, but Gillian had an energy drink in hand, her hair in a messy knot at the crown of her head, black-framed glasses adding angles to her rounded face. The head of weapons development for Faraday Industries looked to be in her home office—for once, thank goodness. Much like the rest of their clan, the brilliant thirty-year-old engineer was a workaholic.

A few minutes ago, Casey had clomped down the stairs from the guest bedroom he'd crashed in for a few hours after arriving at Beth and Vick's two-story home in the Lincoln Square neighborhood of Chicago late last night. Now he had a coffee in his hand, pacing from one end of the open-plan kitchen and living area to the other. He'd settled a bag—Adam's bag—on the island counter in front of their cousin, Della Quinn, before shoving a doughnut into his mouth from a box labeled *Glazed & Infused* sitting near the coffeepot.

Della hadn't bothered with coffee or doughnuts before diving into the broken cell phone, tablet and hard drive she pulled from Adam's bag, her own laptop open on the quartz countertop as she plugged everything in and began to work her magic. As Adam's right hand, Della had put up with Adam's breed of crazy more than just about anyone else in the family. Tobias's kid brother may subscribe to a laissez-faire attitude in the rest of his life, but Adam was an exacting taskmaster when it came to the job. He took his work seriously, protecting every Faraday asset online and doing his fair share of investigating—through means legal and illegal—to perform the sometimes ugly duties that came with running part of the world's leading arms manufacturer.

Now Della muttered to herself as thick silence blanketed the room, plugging cords into devices and typing away with a vicious frown marring her pale face. The trio of delicate hoops piercing her eyebrow blinked in the light as she shoveled a hand through the haphazard white-blond pixie cut. Della hid her true identity under hair dye, skillfully applied liner and lipstick and numerous piercings, and, given what Tobias knew of her

history—and the history of her older siblings, Freya and Keir—that urge toward concealment was understandable.

The Quinns had blood in their backstory. But then, what branch of the Faraday family tree didn't these days?

“So.” Vick grabbed a cup of tea of his own and settled next to Beth, one long arm running along the back of the couch, fingertips stroking over the bare cap of her shoulder. “Everyone’s here.”

Tobias glanced toward the empty entryway to the kitchen. “Not quite every—”

“What’s with the board meeting?” The gravelly Georgia drawl reached them before the owner of that voice did. Gavin Bok limped into the room, pausing to grip the doorframe in one scarred, tattooed hand. Dark blue eyes scanned the room, clear and alert as they hadn’t been in the weeks since he’d given up his undercover work with the Russian mob. Not that Beth’s field partner had planned his exit from the black market arms ring *Polnoch’ Pulya*—he’d been gut-shot and beaten when Tobias, Chandler and Casey had hauled him out of Moscow and delivered him to Beth’s doorstep, and to see the former Navy pilot steady on his feet was a testament to the man’s iron will.

“Gavin. We were just waiting for you.” Tobias looked to the screen where Gillian stared out at them. “Is the audio working on your end?”

She lifted her energy drink in toast. “Loud and clear.”

“Then we begin.” Taking a bracing sip of coffee, his other hand still locked around Chandler’s firm thigh, Tobias recounted the known facts. “At approximately eighteen hundred hours last night, Adam Faraday was assaulted and kidnapped from an alleyway in historic Boston.”

Gavin, the only person who hadn’t known, tensed and cursed, but otherwise remained silent.

“He was on the phone with Casey when the struggle began,” Tobias continued, his voice cool and modulated though inside he felt anything but, “and was able to provide clues as to the identity of his attackers. Three Latino men, one of whom was left-handed, wearing tourist-style clothing, managed to overpower him and got him into an unmarked black panel van that had been parked on a nearby street. A fourth individual was driving the van, identity unknown.” He looked to Casey. “A contact inside Boston PD was able to provide us with red-light camera footage. The van was a rental

out of Logan International Airport, but it was not returned to that location last night, which leads us to believe...”

Casey cleared his throat. “Which leads us to believe they flew out of either a private airstrip or a more rural setting—there’s flat farmland if you drive an hour or so west from the city, mostly abandoned.” He nodded toward Della, who hadn’t bothered to stop clicking and typing during the recap. “We received marginally clear images of the captors’ faces from the footage, so Della is running those against local, national and international offender databases.” Casey paused. “More than twelve hours have passed with no ransom demand.”

He didn’t need to explain further. They all knew if that amount of time had elapsed with no demand, then no demand was forthcoming.

“I spoke with Adam last night,” Della mumbled, eyes glued to her screen. “Must’ve been right before he got Casey on the line.”

Quiet followed that lilting statement, until Gavin lifted a brow in question. “And? What did he say?”

For the first time since Casey had slid the broken tech in front of her, Della looked up, green gaze clashing with Gavin’s blue. “I was instructed not to share.” The hoops in her eyebrow glinted as she mirrored his forbidding expression.

The tension in the room rocketed higher, so Tobias defused it, gently because they were all understandably on edge. “I know what Adam said to you.” Just as he knew that his cousin had been placed under strict orders to only speak to either Adam or Tobias on the matter. Adam’s kidnapping changed things. “Given the circumstances, Della, full disclosure can only strengthen us.” He looked around the room. “Call this the proverbial circle of trust.”

“Dirty laundry, boss, but whatever.” Della shrugged. “Adam asked me to look into a helicopter believed to have been present during the Kabul Girls’ School Bombing last year.” She tipped her head toward Gavin, either oblivious or uncaring of the effect of her words on the rest of the room. “And he said to start by questioning you.”

“Me?” Straightening, Gavin dropped the shielding forearm he had wrapped around his midsection, his glare a ferocious thing. “Why me?”

“Dunno, boyo,” she snapped, lip curled. “Perhaps you ought to unburden yourself to the ‘circle,’ save me the effort of dumping your browser history

and credit card statements. Tell you honest, I don't much fancy discovering whether or not you've got an Asian fetish." Nose wrinkling, Della gestured toward the rest of them. "Trust circle? Your two cents?"

"He prefers busty redheads," Beth offered wryly. "Never once accidentally ran across any Japanese schoolgirls on his laptop." And Beth would know, being that she and Gavin had been nigh inseparable in the three years they'd been partners in the field. That time in the field had, unfortunately, included the disaster in Kabul, the catalyst event that had driven Beth from her life as an assassin-for-hire and sent Gavin spiraling into undercover work with the Russians.

"Not helping, B." Gavin scrubbed a hand over his scruffy jaw and stalked to the coffeepot. "Can't believe y'all are putting me in the crosshairs here," he muttered as he poured, but Tobias noticed he didn't look their way. In fact, his face had gone pale at the mention of the helicopter.

And Tobias wasn't the only one who'd made that observation. Casey, doughnut long since devoured, sauntered over to the island, pressing his palms flat to the counter and spearing Gavin with an assessing glance. "There a reason why Adam might have told Della to start her line of inquiry with you?"

Before Tobias could interrupt—because it was on *his* orders that Adam had started down that road in the first place—Gavin turned, mug in hand, and met Casey's gaze. "Probably due to what I learned while I was under in Moscow. Or...what I think I learned." He indicated a pair of empty chairs in the living area and, reluctantly, Casey followed him, until everyone but Della sat together. Gavin eyed Beth with tender caution. "I wore that cover longer than I should've once I first heard mention of the chopper. Guess I was hoping I could find some sort of redemption for us, B."

"The bombing wasn't our fault, Gavin. Rawad al-Fariq was strapped with explosives, and would've been whether or not we were there." Beth lifted her mug for a cautious sip. "I know we've been trying ever since to make amends for what we *weren't* able to prevent that day. Both of us."

Vick's arm visibly tightened around her. "What was it you learned, Bok?"

"That Karlin Kedrov escaped in a helicopter," Gavin said gravely, naming the villainous leader of the *Polnoch' Pulya*, the man who'd orchestrated Beth's torture, who'd tormented Chandler for almost a year while she was playing double agent in the organization...the man whom

Tobias had killed with a bullet to the head and two to the chest only a few weeks ago, the night that Gavin had been wounded.

Gavin wasn't done. "The only reason Kedrov survived the bomb blast is because he was halfway out the building on his way to the helicopter. It was a getaway."

Everyone absorbed that revelation, but Beth was the first to speak, frowning thoughtfully. "We'd seen him enter the building, though. The heat signature never disappeared."

"But we didn't clear the building ahead of time," Gavin said with a shake of his head. "I've been thinking about it for over a year now, and the conclusion I keep coming back to is Kedrov, already suspicious, had a body man do a sweep before he arrived."

"And so the heat signature we were looking at was that guy's?" Setting aside her mug, Beth leaned forward, elbows propped on her knees and scarred forearms unwittingly on prominent display. Tobias forced himself not to stare at the evidence of her pain, took solace in the fact that both of the monsters responsible for that pain were dead and buried. "Okay, fine, we can argue we fixed our scope on the wrong man, but that just leads to more questions. Like how did Kedrov get out of a building with only one staircase, which I was monitoring like a boss? And why does it matter that he got spooked and booked it out of Dodge on a chopper?" Her frown deepened. "I don't understand why you'd stay with *Polnoch' Pulya* for something so...inconsequential."

"Because he was tipped off ahead of time—either that al-Fariq was strapped to a bomb or that you and I were on the ground with sniper rifles—and whoever tipped him off provided the bird." Gavin's gaze dropped to the coffee mug in his hand. "I stayed undercover because I...think I know where that tip came from."

Della made an irritated noise from her perch at the island. "Dramatic much?"

Gavin glared at her over his shoulder. "It was a Faraday chopper, okay? That's why I stayed. Because a few months ago, I stumbled on a burned-out bird hidden on one of Kedrov's estates, and when I looked closer, I discovered the fireproof floor compartments we'd outfitted all our choppers with." His eyes closed, as if in pain, and maybe he was. Maybe he was hurting just as badly as Tobias was in that moment, as they all were. "I got

the compartment open, and inside were three Faraday assault rifles. The helicopter that got Kedrov out of Kabul was one of ours.”

Rage blasted a path along Tobias’s sternum, choking him with acidic heat he could barely swallow past. “We have a leak,” he said quietly. Dangerously. Chandler’s hand settled on his shoulder, squeezing in a show of solidarity, and he wished—oh, how he wished—he could give in to the firestorm blazing through his bones, but that was not his role. No, right now, his family needed him to be a leader. *The* leader. “Faraday Industries has a leak.”

Beth’s face had gone stark white. “That’s why Nash asked me about the helicopter, and a mole in *Polnoch’ Pulya*, when he was...was interrogating me. He and Kedrov wanted to know if I knew.”

“They wanted to know if they still had Faraday on back-channel speed dial,” Casey growled, pushing out of his chair in obvious anger to pace once more.

“And you had Adam looking into this, all on his own,” Gillian said from the flat-screen, her tone bordering on accusatory. “Is there any chance he was snooping too close to the leak, and that’s why...?”

“Maybe.” Tobias’s mind raced as he considered the known facts and pushed aside hypotheticals. “Remember the shell company *Polnoch’ Pulya* laundered its money through? That shell was operated in consortium by multiple illegal and terrorist organizations, including a couple of cartels out of South America. And Gavin, you were in Chicago as part of your cover before things went to hell, to—”

“To play talking head between the Russian Mob in the city and the Lobos Rojos,” Gavin finished for him. The Lobos Rojos were one of the deadliest drug-running gangs in Chicago, with direct ties to a Colombian cartel.

“Adam was snatched by three Latinos.” Casey stalked his way into the kitchen, taking a loop past the pastry box to grab a bear claw before tearing off a massive bite. He spoke as he chewed. “You’re thinking if the Russians have ties to the Colombians, the same Russians who have one of our people in their pocket—” he emphasized this particular point by shaking the bear claw at the room at large “—then we could feasibly be looking at Colombians in that alley with Adam.”

“If we’re operating on the theory that everything’s tied together.” Tobias remembered the obsessive, panicked nonsense Kedrov had been spouting

about the Faradays moments before he'd killed the bastard—you *think you can buy your power, but power is earned; power is taken*—and combined with Beth's torture, the helicopter Gavin had found... It wasn't anything so simple that they could dissect and solve it all now, but there was definitely one thing they could do. "Della, narrow your search on the suspect images from the red-light cameras to Colombians. Specifically, the Marin cartel."

Both Casey and Vick swore vigorously.

Gillian tapped on the screen. "Hey. Someone fill me in. Why'd the air turn blue just now?"

It was Chandler who answered. "Four years ago, three spies were taken hostage by the Marin cartel, based out of Medellín. Two were CIA, one was MI6."

"That one would be me," Vick supplied.

Nodding, Chandler continued. "An extraction team was sent in to rescue Vick and the Americans. I was there, Beth was there, Bok was there—and Casey ran point." She glanced at a silent Casey before looking back to the screen, at Gillian. "He orchestrated the rescue from inside the Marin cartel, where he had been embedded for a few months as one of the brigadiers in Felipe Marin Donado's personal guard."

"Felipe Marin Donado. Why do I know that name?" Gillian's tone was thoughtful, then she appeared to be typing, the gray eyes behind her glasses scanning her side of the screen as though reading, rapidly. "Holy shit. Pipe? *The Pipe*?" Her gaze sought Casey where he stood near the island counter. "Go big or go home, huh, brother?"

Still, Casey said nothing, and Tobias suddenly remembered what Casey had been like upon returning from Colombia. His bulldozer of an older brother, who so rarely kept his feelings under wraps, had been withdrawn, only a biting temper whipping out to lash those around him in the weeks after he'd come home. He'd resigned his position with the CIA and onboarded completely with Faraday Industries...and then, one day, he'd magically turned into Old Casey, an aggressive but generally genial man with a protective streak ten miles wide.

And Tobias had never bothered to follow up, after that. He'd been so buried in contracts and service agreements and product launches and negotiations, he could barely grab a few hours per night for sleep, much less

stop to examine the temporary odd behavior of one of his siblings. Though perhaps he should have.

Beth looked to Gillian. “How do you know Pipe?”

“Outside of the news?” Gillian shrugged. “He’s sent a few...gifts over the years, trying to convince me to provide him with Faraday weapons.” And the only customer of Faraday weaponry was the United States government, in an agreement that had been in place since the mid-nineteenth century.

“Gifts?”

“You know my Aston Martin?”

“The Vanquish? No.”

“Yes.” Gillian grinned. “I mean, I had it completely disassembled and swept for trackers or explosives, but yeah.” When no one said anything, she threw up her hands defensively. “What? I’d like to see *you* turn away a ride that sexy. And it’s not like I gave him any guns.”

Everyone knew Gillian had a thing for cars, and not for one second did Tobias believe she’d made a deal with a drug kingpin so infamous he’d loitered on the FBI’s ten-most-wanted list for close to a decade. Felipe Marin Donado—or Pipe Marin, as he was more colloquially known—was an intelligent businessman worth hundreds of millions in dirty narcoterrorist dollars, a beloved leader of the people under his protection and a vicious power known for the biblically bloodthirsty manner in which he took on and took out his enemies.

While in Pipe’s care, Vick had lost a couple of molars, a toe, suffered broken ribs and some minor internal bleeding, and Tobias knew that had been the Marin cartel’s version of benign neglect. The two CIA operatives had been in far worse shape when the extraction team snatched them from an outbuilding in the forest where they were being held.

Chandler left Tobias’s side to settle her teacup in the kitchen sink, then turned to face the room, leaning against the counter next to Casey. The ache that had taken root beneath his sternum eased as understanding of what she was doing for his brother dawned.

Bringing up the Marin cartel and rehashing his time in Medellín had obviously upset Casey, so Chandler was standing by him. Knowing he wouldn’t lean on her, wouldn’t trust her, she offered her support. She didn’t want him to stand alone, with whatever was going on inside him at the moment.



Tobias suspected she'd deny doing so if he called her on it, but he knew her and that big bleeding heart she worked day in and day out to keep under wraps. He knew her, and he loved her, and suddenly he wanted to snatch her up and haul her away to some darkened corner of the house where they wouldn't be disturbed for at least thirty minutes. Thirty very long, very private minutes where he could show her exactly how much he appreciated that bleeding heart of hers.

Her voice, when she spoke, was all business, though. "As I see it, we have two major concerns, the primary of which is retrieving Adam from wherever he's being held." Reaching up, she tightened the elastic holding her blond ponytail in place. "The other is to learn why you Faradays are being targeted in recent months, and who's doing the targeting." She turned, eyeing Della and muttering, "I'm surrounded by Quinns, every bloody place I go."

Della flipped her the bird, not bothering to shift her focus from the laptop.

With a good-natured chuckle, Chandler gestured to Della's setup. "For now, I vote we backburner the helicopter issue and concentrate on identifying who took Adam and why we haven't received a ransom demand. Once we have names and potential locations, we gather a trusted tactical team—Casey, Vick, myself, maybe a handful of Faraday employees you believe without a doubt aren't your leak—and do a single day of recon and sweep, followed by a nighttime extraction, chopper to jet, a couple of road vehicles to dilute the trail." Her hands fell to her hips. "Finer details can be worked out once we have a specific target. And gold star to us if we can grab one of Adam's kidnappers for interrogation purposes at the same time. Any questions?"

"Yeah." Della finally looked up. "You wanna hear the names of the bastards who took our pet hacker or no?"

Chandler heaved a put-upon sigh. "Please."

"We got hits off Interpol and US DEA for three known members of the Marin cartel. Manuel Dias, Eddy Jimenez and Juan David Guzman. No identity on the driver, but Dias, Jimenez and Guzman all have registered addresses central to Medellín."

"I know Manuel."

Everyone stared at Casey.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Manuel Dias and I ran patrols together when I was undercover with the cartel. He’s a mean sonofabitch, and Pipe’s top brigadier. Manuel’s breed of loyalty can’t be bought.” Casey’s voice was completely without inflection. “Which means Adam was taken under the express orders of Pipe Marin.”

What they didn’t know was why, but Tobias was determined to find out. “I have contacts at both the DEA and Interpol. There’s bound to be either an operative or informant with boots on the ground in or near the cartel. We keep it quiet, of course, but we get visual confirmation that Adam’s actually there. Gillian?”

“Sup?”

“I need you to borrow some satellites.”

Gillian clapped her hands together in glee. “You know how much I love appropriating other people’s property.”

“Borrowing, Gillian. Borrowing.” Tobias pushed out of his chair. “I want every place owned by Pipe Marin under surveillance. It’ll be difficult to pinpoint Adam, but look for movement that indicates something or someone being guarded 24/7.”

“The only reason we were able to successfully rescue Vick and the two CIA agents,” Casey said softly, in a tone of voice Tobias had never before heard from his older brother, “is because I was embedded in the cartel. I knew patrol patterns, Pipe’s daily schedule, who was in charge of what, and where to be to avoid detection. All of that will have changed since then, but I can guarantee you this—simple extraction won’t work. Pipe runs his cartel like it’s Fort fucking Knox.” He paused, sighed. “I need to go back in.”

This time, the whole room seemed to curse as one, but it was Gavin’s voice that carried best. “Can’t revive a dead cover, man.”

Casey shook his head. “Dead, not burned. We left behind a deceased brigadier in my clothes with my ID and a face so busted it wasn’t recognizable. My cover, Casímiro Cortez, supposedly died that day. Turn Casímiro into a runaway coward instead, and I can come back to the fold now that I feel I’m out of danger. Or something.”

“But what about Pipe?” Beth asked. “He was there that morning, at the outbuilding. I had him in my sights. How can you be sure he didn’t see you during the firefight?”

“Because he was pulling me out the back of that building.” This from Vick. “And my understanding is that you and Gavin were keeping Pipe pinned down in the front.”

“Regardless,” Casey interrupted, “I can revive my cover. Especially if I come bearing gifts.” He looked to Vick. “The crate that was delivered to your new office here last week?”

“Jesus,” Vick muttered, scrubbing a hand over his bearded jaw.

“Yeah, that. I bring that with me, I have an in.”

“Do I want to know what’s in the crate?” Tobias asked calmly, though he made a mental note to run an inventory check on the Faraday Chicago office as soon as he had a moment.

“No,” came the unanimous response from both Casey and Vick, though Casey kept speaking. “Tobias, get in touch with Interpol, find out who’s available to grease my cartel reintroduction. I’ll fly down, make contact and pray Pipe doesn’t shoot me on sight.” He jerked a thumb at Chandler. “Her plan is solid, once I’ve got Adam’s location and get a refresher on patrol schedules and Pipe’s whereabouts. One week, maybe two. Then you bring in a tac team and we run it like we did Vick’s rescue.”

“Will Adam last two weeks?”

Beth gave Della a hard stare. “Yes. And not just because he’s a tough little shit. If Pipe’s not asking for money, then he probably wants information, and it takes time to interrogate someone. There’s also the chance that they want him for what he can do with a computer, not just Faraday intel. Again, that warrants time.”

“But just to be safe, I’m leaving tonight,” Casey interjected. “The sooner I’m in Colombia, the sooner we can get Adam home. And then,” his voice darkened, “we hunt those who hunt us.”

Tobias didn’t have a response, but one wasn’t necessary this time. Casey’s mind was made up, and given Tobias’s recent vigilantism, he was in no position to throw stones and tell his brother not to get his head blown off in South America. What he could do, however, was make sure Casey had options once he was with the cartel—and that meant making a few calls.

Conversation diverted then into planning, with Gillian signing off to do her satellite research, Gavin and Beth rehashing what they remembered from the mission four years ago, Casey and Vick doing much the same and

Della turning her attention back to Adam's smashed hardware. Tobias locked eyes with Chandler and held out his hand, and immediately she came to him, linking her slender fingers with his. Just that small contact with her leached some of the tension from his muscles. Only she could do that for him, be that for him. Only Chandler.

Promising they'd reconvene again before Casey flew out, Tobias and Chandler bid their quick goodbyes and were out the front door, across the porch and down the steps to the waiting town car. After directing the driver to the Peninsula hotel, where he had a suite booked, Tobias leaned back with a sigh, his eyes closing as he took a deep breath for the first time in what felt like weeks.

"So. That went well."

He smiled at Chandler's dry tone before tugging her into his lap and wrapping his arms around her in a hold so fierce and so tight she could never escape. Not that she tried. No, she returned his hug with her strong arms looped around his neck, face buried at the base of his throat. He kissed her temple, then her cheek, the curve of her jaw and, when she tilted her chin, took her mouth like the necessity it was. Nothing soothed him quite so much as kissing Chandler, holding her...keeping her. That she planned to let him keep her forever still astounded him.

With one last, soft brush against her lips, he cuddled her closer, tucking her petite yet powerful body into his and letting his chin rest atop her head. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart. I know it wasn't easy, being in that room with Beth and the others."

Her hand came to rest on his chest, the heat from her fingertips seeping through his vest and dress shirt to brand the skin beneath. "It shouldn't be easy for me. I transgressed against them, Toby. I can take my punishment."

But he didn't want her to be punished, the woman he loved by the people he loved. "You gave us good direction in there." Of course she had; Chandler's was a clever mind, filled to the brim with tactical knowledge from her years in the military and as a spy. Now she stood poised to take command of an elite unit within Britain's MI6 tasked with preventing acts of global terrorism. His pride in her knew no bounds.

She patted his chest. "I won't let anyone hurt your family, baby."

"They're your family now, too."

“Not yet, but they will be.” She finally melted against him, and Tobias gave in, wrapping both arms tightly around her. “And you know I always protect what’s mine.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Three

*Medellín, Colombia*

He knew he was dreaming. Dreams that were memories, and memories that were nightmares.

*The sheets twisted around him...*

He took a swig from the water bottle, trying to forget just how much he hated the heat. This below-the-equator bullshit was starting to get to him. He sweated all the damn time, even when he slept, even in the fucking shower. Even the cold spray couldn't cool him off.

Laughter from the front of the private box, drawing his attention to where Pipe sat with his arm around his fiancée, surrounded by his inner circle. All wore green somewhere on their persons in support of the Nacional on the pitch far in front of them. Atanasio Girardot Stadium was packed to the gills, the entire city turned out for the epic match-up between Pipe's club—because of course he owned shares in Atlético Nacional—and Independiente Medellín. Neighbor versus neighbor in today's game, the fucking event of the *fútbol* season.

Which meant Casey ought to be on the alert, instead of sweating and bitching in his head, missing the blizzards of home. He was Pipe's guard, for the time being, and that meant keeping a watchful eye.

The fiancée, Théa, lifted her head from Pipe's shoulder and pointed down at the field excitedly. While Pipe leaned forward and smiled, Casey studied the box. One exit, windows on three sides, and the glass was bullet-proof. After the Escobar era, cartel kingpins took no chances. It made Casey's job easier, and anything that simplified this particular mission fell into the plus column.

Abruptly, everyone in the box stood, hands over their hearts, and Casey followed cue. The first strains of the Colombian national anthem drifted over the stadium's speaker system. He couldn't see the field or the singer or the flag, but that didn't matter.

Or at least, it didn't matter until the truth of the voice hit his brain. Low and full-bodied, female, with just enough rasp in the rich tones to be undeniably sensual. She—whoever she was—had no instrumental accompaniment, but soon enough, the crowd had joined their forty thousand voices with hers, lifted in patriotic song, and she led them, beautifully, proudly.

From his position in the back corner next to the wet bar, he strained to see the pitch, find the source that had the tiny hairs on the back of his neck lifting and his pulse tripping. He didn't really care about music, never had; he'd just as soon work out in silence and leave the radio off in the car. But there was life in this woman's voice as the verses blended together, and finally he caught a glimpse of her on the scoreboard screen, the camera zooming in on her smiling face.

Because she was smiling, so big and wide and white and dimpled, staring at her was akin to staring directly into the sun. Pretty, he thought, then immediately corrected himself because, actually, she was gorgeous. Her hair was somewhere between blond and brunette, a long mane of tight curls lifting slightly in the breeze, and he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to sink his hands into all that hair. And pet it. And fist it.

He was still sweating when the anthem ended, when the camera feed shifted from the singer to the crowds, roaring and chanting as the teams took their positions on the field. Pipe and the others took their seats again, informal bets and good-natured jousting flying across the box. The bartender in the corner poured more drinks, and a knock on the door preceded the caterer's overladen cart of sweet and savory morsels.

Except that the caterer wasn't the only person Pipe's guards had permitted through the door. In bounced her. The woman. The singer, all beaming grins and cheerful greetings as she rushed Théa, slinging slender arms around the woman.

Casey tried not to stare. Really, he tried. He managed to keep his eyes off her for at least five seconds, and then he drained the water bottle, his throat so parched he could barely swallow. And when he did look at her—just a glance, just one glance—he barely noticed the pale blue wrap dress clinging to curves he could sink his teeth into, or the tall shoes that would barely bring the top of her head to his shoulder.

That *did* barely bring her to his shoulder, because suddenly there she was in front of him, requesting a mojito of the bartender before she glanced sideways at him. “*Hola.*”

He nodded. “*Hola.* You sing...well.” Smooth, Casey. Real smooth.

Laughing as though he’d said something amusing, when he knew full well he hadn’t, she shifted to stare up at him. Dark eyes twinkled, the edges crinkling, as she extended one slim, manicured hand. On her index finger was an intricate silver ring bearing some sort of opaque white stone. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

For a split second, Casey’s mind raced to uncover any cracks in his cover. Was she someone he ought to have recognized? Part of Pipe’s inner circle? When he came up blank, he shrugged and took her hand. Warm, soft, small but with a firm grip. He liked her handshake. “I know you’re the most beautiful woman in this room. Is that enough?” His thumb stroked over the bumps of her knuckles as he gave her a sly grin.

She grinned back. “Not from Medellín, then.”

Again, he wondered if his cover identity had holes visible only to this particular woman. “Not from Colombia at all. My people are from Maracaibo.”

“Venezuela?” Her gaze raked him from head to toe. “Yes, I suppose I can see that. Not to mention your accent.”

He fought not to stiffen. “What accent?” He’d studied for months prior to taking this assignment to master the regional shaping of his Spanish vowels and consonants.

“Don’t take it personally, big guy.” The corner of her mouth quirked. “I’ve got a good ear.” Finally, she appeared to take pity on him, squeezing his hand before releasing him. “Ilda Almeida.”

Théa’s sister. And that meant she was one half of the pop-guitar duo Almángel that had won last year’s Best New Artist at the Latin Grammys. He’d known who Théa was before taking this assignment, of course, but he’d barely bothered glancing at her professional photographs—the ones she took with her sister, Ilda—before focusing more acutely on Théa’s relationship with her infamous fiancé. “Casímiro Cortez,” he offered, lying easily.

“Oh, that is far too much of a mouthful for me.” And damn, he had to bite his tongue to keep from steamrolling straight into that deliberate bit of



flirtation. “I think I’ll call you Casí.”

*The dream shifted...*

The club was drenched in darkness, red and gold lights flashing intermittently onto the writhing mass of drunken dancers. Casey felt like a lurker from his post at the edge of the dance floor, his eyes always coming back from their perimeter scan to latch onto the group of sequined women doing their best Spice Girls impression. Théa’s bachelorette party was in full swing, and central to all the festivities was Ilda, dancing like a goddess and drinking like a fish.

He’d been watching her all night. God, the body on that woman. Her hair was piled high on her head, baring the slender column of her neck and leaving her shoulders temptingly naked in that tiny strapless black dress. Though it hardly qualified as a dress—more a swatch of fabric covering the pertinent curvy bits. Neon-pink stilettos made her legs look ten miles long, and she moved in them effortlessly.

He hadn’t touched her since their handshake in the stadium box two weeks ago, but he still felt the imprint of her palm against his. After that brief exchange, she had settled in next to her sister and Pipe and never glanced his way again. Which was good. Smart. She shouldn’t be looking at him, and he definitely shouldn’t want her to, because he was CIA, damn it, and his cover necessitated him blending into the background as another of Pipe’s grunts. He shouldn’t want her eyes on him, or her hands on him, her mouth, her tongue—

Feminine arms banded around his waist from behind. “Casí.”

He tensed but didn’t turn. “Miss Almeida. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Here? In the club? But I like the club.”

Saucy. “With me, señorita.” Pipe’s future sister-in-law had no business fraternizing with a low-level brigadier, and the moment Pipe noticed her attention—or Casey’s, for that matter—there would be hell to pay. “Go dance with your sister.”

“I’d rather dance with you.” Her full breasts pressed against his back, her hips shifting and swishing against his ass.

Small hands flattened over his stomach before dipping lower, toward his belt, and he risked a glance downward to see her moonstone ring winking up at him, glowing ruby in the light of the club. “Señorita,” he warned.

“Ilda.” Her body rolled, a subtle, sensual writhing that immediately made him harder than stone. “Dance with me, Casí.”

Halting the movement of her hands by linking his fingers with hers, he allowed the thumping bass from the club’s speakers to infiltrate his bloodstream. No one had seen them together, not yet, so he stole a few brief seconds as the music washed over him and into her. Or maybe it was coming from her and infecting him, because Casey wasn’t a man who danced, just like he wasn’t a man who sang, or played, or took unnecessary risks while undercover in the world’s most dangerous drug cartel. He let his body move in time with hers, doing little more than swaying in place while she performed the equivalent of a blind lap dance. Him being the blind party.

Her fingertips curled into his abs, testing the resistance of his muscled flesh. “You feel good, Casí. Like a man.”

The hard points of her nipples brushed against his back. She was turned on. Dancing with him, touching him, had aroused her, and that was worth another spot of daring on his part. Because, evidently, he had a death wish.

Spinning, he broke her hold and dropped a heavy hand to her chest, the heel of his palm resting along the tops of her breasts. He pushed, gentle but purposeful, and she trustingly stepped backward, her gaze never leaving his. She was smiling when he maneuvered her around a corner toward a utility closet, and she kept smiling even when her shoulders hit the wall.

His fingers splayed over her collarbone, he bent until their noses brushed. “You like teasing me? Torturing me?”

Her tongue darted out to flick his lower lip. “Only because I want a taste of you, Casí.”

He dug deep for patience, for common sense, for some sort of self-preservation...and found none. Breathing in her scent—floral, light, sweet and fresh—Casey let loose a growl, unashamedly predatory. “You want a taste, Ilda? Because once I give it to you, you’re gonna need to keep coming back for more.” The hand on her chest shifted, lifting to circle her delicate throat. “You’re gonna need me.”

She gripped the front of his T-shirt in both hands. “That’s what I’m banking on.” Tugging hard, she brought his mouth to hers in a searing kiss.

*God, why couldn't he wake up?*

He glanced in the Escalade's rearview mirror, seeing not the traffic on the road but the woman in the back seat. "You're quiet tonight."

Ilda kept her face turned to the window, expression pensive. "I'm sorry."

He gritted his teeth. "Don't apologize. Just tell me what's on your mind." He paused. "No one's listening."

"I don't care if anyone is listening, Casí!" The words exploded from her, anger in every syllable, and he heard her move restlessly in her seat. "I want to tell Pipe about us."

"That would be a mistake." On so many levels would that be a mistake. Signaling, he made a right turn into the underground garage beneath Ilda's luxury condo building in El Poblado.

"I already told Théa."

Worry seized him as he pulled into one of the reserved parking spaces for her unit. If Théa knew, it was only a matter of time until Pipe found out, and the consequences of his secret relationship with Ilda would finally manifest. Likely involving some sort of pain for Casey. Killing the ignition, he hopped out of the driver's seat, opened the door to the back and climbed in beside her, slamming the door behind him. Without a word, he cupped her lovely face in his hands and stole the kiss he'd been aching for all night as he stood guard over the rehearsal dinner. He'd been forced to witness Pipe's groomsmen hit on her, though Pipe never permitted his men to go a step too far; being his future sister-in-law at the very least provided Ilda with a degree of protection.

She was beautiful tonight, but she was always beautiful. A silk gown in forest green draped her petite frame in what he thought might be a Grecian style, pounded gold metal accents at the single shoulder and beneath the bust. Her curls were gathered in an intricate twist just off-center from her nape, and gold links dangled from her ears. A goddess with a siren's voice, yet she was more than that, as he'd come to learn over the last few weeks.

Ilda was sly and pushy and generous, constantly seeking the next moment that would lead to laughter and happiness. A bright ball of sunshine, if that sunshine had an attitude and a sex drive that threatened to bring a man to his knees.

Casey feared he might have been on his knees since day one with her. His lips parted hers, tongue sweeping in to get at the sweet taste of her. He'd had his mouth on every inch of her body in their stolen moments together,

no part of her ignored or untested. During those interludes, she was a grenade in his arms, exploding with a violence he craved to his bones.

“I love you,” he breathed in between kisses. The words escaped before he had time to second-guess the wisdom of saying what had taken root in his heart. His thumbs stroked over her cheekbones, a caress that had become familiar in the short time they’d had together. “I love you, Ilda.”

“What?” She pushed against his chest, gasping for air and putting space between them as she searched his face. “Casí, do you really?” Her dark eyes gleamed wetly in the dim light of the underground garage. “Don’t lie to me about this.”

“I’m not lying.” Yet he was lying to her about so many other things. Such as who the hell he was. He smoothed the few escaped curls back from her temples. “I wouldn’t lie about loving you.”

Her breath hitched audibly. “Then stay with me tonight.” She reached up to run a fingertip along the line of his nose before tracing the shape of his lips, her touch as light and soft as a cloud. “You never stay.”

With good reason. It didn’t matter if he was off duty or on patrol, there was no such thing as privacy in the cartel. One night away from the hacienda would raise notice, which was why he’d never risked spending the night with Ilda. No matter how much he needed to know what it was like to sleep with her in his arms until he woke up with her at dawn. Needed to kiss and pet her from slumber as sunlight filtered through the windows.

So he broke the rules. Again. Perhaps it was time he recognized there were no longer any rules when it came to Ilda Almeida. “I’m staying.”

*He couldn’t breathe, his lungs bruised against his rib cage.*

The black birdcage veil did little to conceal the shock in her big brown eyes, or the pain. The long-sleeved black linen dress was the most conservative he’d ever seen on her, worn like armor to protect a fragile heart. She had needed that armor when she’d stood at the front of the church that morning and lifted her tear-roughened voice in song. That she hadn’t broken once during the mournful hymn was a testament to her strength.

Casey had never been prouder of anyone in his life than he had been of Ilda Almeida singing her sister’s soul into heaven. His phoenix, her wings dusted in the ashes of grief, dappled in the kaleidoscope light from the stained-glass window of the Madonna and Child overhead.

He'd made his decision in that moment, and now it was time to act. Straightening his shoulders, he approached her where she stood at the balcony rail on the second floor of the main house, staring sightlessly out at the southern courtyard. They'd returned to the hacienda following Théa's burial, and shortly thereafter, he'd seen Ilda slip away from the subdued guests gathered downstairs, so he had followed her. It wasn't smart, to pursue her so publicly, but fuck, they'd laid her sister to rest today. She shouldn't have to bear the weight of that armor alone. "Ilda."

Her hand lifted from the rail as if to ward him off. "I can't handle your half-truths right now, Casí. Leave me be."

His chest ached but he ignored her hand, and her words. "I'm not leaving you. You need me."

Her sharp laugh was entirely without humor. "You're right, I do," she confessed, like it was no big deal to admit her feelings for him, though her blunt words staggered him. "But I need to be alone more."

Stepping behind her, he looped his arm over her chest, urging her to lean against him. After a tense moment, she did, the breath leaving her in a shaking sigh. His palm curved around her upper arm, squeezing comfortingly. "I disagree, baby."

A little gasping whimper escaped before she could stifle the sound, and her head tipped back on his shoulder. The veil shivered as she gripped his forearm, not tugging him away but simply holding on for dear life. "I always knew cartel violence would touch us someday. For some reason, though, I thought... I don't know. I thought being so close to Pipe might protect Théa from the worst of it. Naive of me."

Casey pressed his lips to the top of her head. "It should have protected her, you're right." But the feud between the Orras and Marin cartels was epically bloody, and eventually violence against the lords' families was bound to occur, though to target a loved one was a declaration of war. Casey refused to let Ilda be caught in the crossfire. "Marry me."

"No."

"No?" He wrapped his other arm around her waist, and now he held her, tight and secure. "Is it because of my secrets?"

"It's because I'm in mourning, you ass." Her words lacked heat but not conviction. "And somehow I doubt you're willing to wait a year, not with all those secrets of yours."

“You’re right, I can’t wait.” Again, he kissed her crown, breathing in the scent he knew now was gardenia. It made the knots inside him loosen, ever so slightly. “But I need to get you out of this hell, and you can’t tell me Théa wouldn’t want me to.” Not after this.

Ilda heaved a watery sigh. “Are you proposing because you want to save me?”

His jaw clenched. “I want to save you because I love you.” He loved her so much he couldn’t breathe without thinking of her, without needing to seek her out and coax her into taking him inside her body, where his heart lived. He loved her so much that he...he trusted her. “I’m leaving here in a matter of days,” he whispered. “I have to, I don’t have a choice, and once I’m gone, I can’t return.”

“I see.”

“Do you? Do you see that the only way we can be together is if you come home with me, as my wife?” He wasn’t playing fair here, but he was a desperate man. “I know you’re in mourning, and I understand tradition, but damn it, Ilda. I can’t leave you here.”

“Then don’t leave.”

Stubborn. She was so fucking stubborn, and even when her heart was breaking, her attitude had teeth. He breathed through his frustration, reaching for a well of patience he was pretty sure he didn’t possess. “You keep asking me to stay, and this time, if I do, it’s a fucking death warrant.”

She sucked in a breath. “What did you do, Casí?”

Too much and yet not enough, because Ilda had lost her best friend and older sister. Instead of answering her, he tightened his hold. “Do you love me?” She hadn’t ever said it back to him, but he knew. He knew.

“Casí...”

“Do you love me?”

A tense silence grew between them until her quiet, husky voice broke it. Blessedly. “I do.”

Euphoria blasted through him at her confirmation. “Enough to tie your life to mine?”

Her answer came much quicker this time. “Yes.”

“Then tie it, and let me love you for the rest of our days.”

Yes.

He lurched to a halt behind the tree line, staring in horror at the smoldering chapel, smoke and ash thick in the air as orange flames continued to lick along the devoured framework. The walls had collapsed, the doors and windows exploded outward, the roof invisible in the heavy black haze. People, neighbors, hauled water and dragged hoses, while actual firefighters attempted to dampen and control the damage.

The sun barely peeked over the horizon, much of the sky over the hills still purple in the pre-dawn light. Stars winked out one by one to the north as smoke wisped its gray way into the atmosphere, stinging his eyes. Fuck, his eyes stung.

“Casey, bro. What’re we doin’?” Gavin’s voice beside him yanked him from his reverie, his drawl clipped as he took in the destruction. Hearing English again, speaking it, felt weird after his half-year immersion, and it jarred him into action.

He lunged for the edge of the trees, knowing in the pit of his stomach that Ilda was in there. With the fire. Ilda. Even his beautiful phoenix couldn’t survive those flames.

Strong arms caught him around his middle. “Dude, stop.” A grunt, as Casey’s elbow inadvertently connected with Gavin’s ribs. “Seriously, man. You’re dead, remember? We just left your shit on some bastard’s body for a goddamn reason, and if you pull a Houdini and show up where you’re not supposed to be right now, you’re going to ruin the entire op.”

“But she’s in there.” It didn’t matter that Gavin had no idea who she was. “She’s in there, waiting for me.” His voice cracked, broke, and he scrambled in his pocket for his cell, punching in her number from memory. She wouldn’t recognize the US country code, but if she was trapped...surely she would pick up.

The other end of the line rang. And rang. And rang.

With a hoarse curse, he hung up and redialed, hoping against hope to be sent to voicemail. Maybe she’d left the chapel against his instructions. Or maybe...maybe she was in the woods, hiding, waiting for him to find her. He pocketed the phone. “Search the trees for a young woman in a white dress,” he commanded Gavin. “Five-one, hundred or so pounds, curly light-brown hair.” Without wasting another second, he retreated deeper into the surrounding forest, eyes peeled for a flash of white cotton in the dirt or stuck to a branch. For twenty minutes, he tromped across every meter, until

the foliage grew too thick and the sun rose higher, shedding dangerous light on his position.

“She’s not here, bro.” Gavin, again, this time gripping his shoulder, and it was then that Casey realized he’d stopped moving and was staring at the chapel through the veil of tall tree trunks. “Was she—?”

“Inside. She was inside.” He covered his mouth with his forearm, biting down hard to keep from shouting, eyes blind with sudden tears that he let fall, uncaring that Gavin watched him with more than a little apprehension.

“Casey, we have to *go*...”

Casey woke with a gasp, eyes stinging, naked torso damp with sweat. The woven blades of the ceiling fan moved the air over the bed, but did little to cool his body tangled in the sheets. Blinking, he patted his chest blindly until he found what he was looking for, and his fingers curled around the chain he rarely took off. The chain carrying his dog tags...and Ilda’s moonstone ring, which she had given him on their wedding day in place of the band she hadn’t had time to purchase.

The dreams—memories—hadn’t been this vivid in years. No doubt being back in Medellín brought them all rushing to the surface. Okumura had flown him in-country early that morning, and Casey had made his way to the crappy hotel where he’d checked in under the name Casímiro Cortez. The DEA informant embedded within Pipe’s organization was supposed to make contact with him this afternoon, so he’d used the time to get his head on straight.

The plane ride ought to have been enough, but instead he’d spent it cleaning his weapons and reviewing his cover. And avoiding thinking of those too-short weeks in the arms of his now-dead wife. Too bad in sleep he couldn’t hide from that on which his mind wished to dwell.

He pushed himself from the bed, leaving his khaki cargos unbuttoned and riding low on his hips. The dwelling had gotten worse, even before arriving in Colombia, pushing its way into his daily consciousness. The demons were no more than dark, heavy clouds, fueled by futile anger and massive self-recrimination, but they were persistent motherfuckers, dragging at him with claws and teeth.

But here, in Medellín where the nightmares had happened, the claws were poison and the teeth were serrated.



Prowling to the window, he flicked aside the sheer curtain to glance out at the street below. Kids rode by on bicycles, shouting and laughing, and young teens played a pick-up soccer game at the end of the block. Shopkeepers sat under colorful awnings, while music drifted from the upstairs windows of the building across the way, a cheerful dance number accompanied by the off-key singing of whomever lived in the flat. All in all, a normal afternoon on a mostly residential street bordering the Parque Periodista neighborhood. Money from the Marin cartel had funded a huge revitalization effort in the neighborhood over the past decade, working to drive out local drug dealers and modernize the urban landscape. Young people were beginning to feel safe in starting their families in the area, but trouble plagued the residents after nightfall nonetheless.

Casey had chosen the small hotel because it sat safely within Pipe's territory, though only those with intimate knowledge of the cartel would be aware of that. Casey possessed such knowledge, and staying here sent a very distinct message, should the DEA contact fall through.

He didn't fear the cartel. Probably made him an idiot, but he didn't. Pipe Marin was a terrifying bastard when he needed to be, no two ways about it, but Casey had been under with the organization for several months. Respect functioned as the core tenet of Pipe's leadership style, and with the exception of his dalliance with Ilda, Casey had never done a thing to lose Pipe's respect. If nothing else, that history ought to ease his transition back into the cartel.

Stepping away from the window, he moved to the mini-fridge humming in the corner and snagged a water bottle, relishing the cold drink as he struggled to shove aside the remnants of his dreams. "Fuckin' hate this country," he muttered, swiping at his eyes to rid them of sweat and...other wetness. Being back here was like immersion therapy, if immersion therapy made one feel like shit on a Humvee tread.

He thought it probably did. Perhaps this stint would finally get the demons off his back, and he could move on with his life.

That was what he was supposed to do, right? Move on and find a good woman. Another good woman, that is. Maybe when he was stateside again, he should give Sara a call, and a real chance this time. They'd had fun, and if he'd suffered a spate of guilt afterward, that was his issue, not hers.

It wasn't cheating if his wife was dead, regardless if his heart said otherwise.

Jesus, he hated this fucking country.

A sharp knock sounded on the door to his hotel room. Setting aside the water bottle, he yanked off his tags, shoving them in his pocket before he grabbed the handgun off the desk, checked the safety. "*Quién es?*" he called, standing to the side of the door on the off-chance the person out in the hallway decided to start shooting.

"*Busco niño del miercoles.*" The code phrase was delivered softly, and correctly. "*Es un Faraday ahí?*"

His ears...they had to be playing tricks on him, because he couldn't breathe. No, wait, he was breathing. Too fast, too hard, his chest rising and falling like he'd sprinted a mile instead of just standing frozen in place. A sudden chill cooled the sweat beading his skin, and the hand gripping the gun trembled lightly.

Making quick work of the safety chain, he threw back the dead bolt and yanked open the door. Oxygen left him in a rush, his stomach abruptly knotted with rusty iron chains. "You can't be real." His voice shook as he stared, wild-eyed, at the DEA contact. "You died."

"No," said his wife, her face draining of all color as she stumbled back from the doorway. "You died."

## Chapter Four

When Ilda Almeida had woken up that morning, it had been with a smile on her face. Even the text message waiting from her handler hadn't worried her overmuch, not enough to dim her good mood. She'd eaten a hearty breakfast, gone to mass and returned home to run a few kilometers on the treadmill. Hours later, her escort had dropped her at the club and gone about his business, while she'd slipped out the back and jogged the few blocks to the hotel where she was supposed to meet an American named Faraday.

She forgot how to smile as she collapsed against the wall, her shaking knees barely holding her upright as she stared at a dead man. A face that was older, harsher, his bone structure almost violent in its blunt masculinity. Dark hair buzzed nearly to the scalp, brows black as a raven's wings and shrewd gray-hazel eyes. An uncompromising mouth she'd once felt on every inch of her body—begged for, in fact, on countless occasions.

Casímiro Cortez had been a singular force in her life. Not a day passed where she didn't think of him, not once in four years, and to see him standing within touching distance after believing him to be *deceased* did not compute. Her brain was on a permanent record skip the longer she stared at him. "What do you mean, *I* died?"

He appeared shell-shocked. "The chapel...the chapel was leveled. With you inside."

The memory of searing pain, thankfully dulled with time, slashed across her upper back. "Yes."

Evidently her simple response wasn't enough, because he gripped the doorframe in one white-knuckled hand, as if he needed the support to remain upright. "I was there. I saw the satellite footage. No one left that rubble—not the priest, not you. *Not you*, Ilda."

"You...were there." She couldn't process this. What did he mean, he was there? If he were there, wouldn't he have gotten her out? It almost sounded as though he'd sat on the sidelines and observed her entrapment within the chapel, doing nothing to help, letting her hurt for what seemed like decades before help came along.

A throbbing started in her temple, and she suddenly remembered where she was, where they were. Barging past him into the hotel room, noting that he practically leaped out of the way to avoid touching her, she whirled, shoving her fists into the pockets of her flowing white linen trousers to keep from reaching for him. He didn't want to touch her? Fine. She didn't need her hands anywhere near him, either.

Ilda watched in silence as he bolted the door and drew the chain before moving to the windows to twist the blinds closed and adjust the curtains. The light in the tiny hotel room dimmed, but not enough to lessen the impact of him in all his bare-chested glory. Casí, with his brute strength and the unvarnished power that had always radiated from him. Casí, her Casí.

"Who is Faraday?" An American named Faraday, that was who her handler's text had said was in this particular hotel room—an American for whom she needed to facilitate an introduction with Pipe. Except Pipe would know this man's face. "We found a body, in your clothes, with your ID. You...you died in a fire with the Orras cartel."

Shaking his head, he tossed his pistol on the bed, and she did her best not to glare at it. "We had to make it look like I died."

"We?" The throbbing increased, painfully, and she rubbed at the offending spot on her temple. "I ask you again, Casí—who is Faraday?"

"I am." He propped his hands on his hips—hips with that lickable pair of divots winging from bone to groin—and dropped his head back for a bare instant until he snapped into watchfulness again. A watchfulness directed entirely at her. His Spanish, when he spoke, was as perfect as it had been when she'd known him; she never would have him pegged as an American, though he couldn't pass for Colombian either. "My name is Casey Faraday. When we met—" His throat bobbed in a swallow. "When we met, I was with the CIA, part of a long-term undercover operation where I reported on Pipe to the US government. A week before...before the chapel, Pipe captured three spies who had sniffed too close to his activities in the city—two American and one British. I was in the best position to rescue those hostages, so that's what I did. That morning, when I left you, that's what I did."

Casey Faraday. His name was Casey Faraday, and he was a spy. She'd married an American spy who *saved* people for a living. Just as he'd attempted to save her. Attempted, and failed. She massaged her temple,

wishing desperately for her mind to finally make sense of all that she was hearing. “Why are you back in Medellín?”

“Because he did it again.” Casí’s—Casey’s—voice was gruff, unforgiving. “Pipe took another hostage, and I have to get that hostage home to his family.”

The man had a savior complex, and she told him as much.

Frustration flushed his face and he paced forward a step. “And you have a death wish. What the hell are you doing, snitching on Pipe?” Too close, but not close enough, he got in her space, emotion bright in his stormy gaze.

Her own anger locked into place, giving her a moment of peace in the hurricane of her current thoughts, long enough to turn that anger into a divining rod pointed directly at this lying American spy. “I’m doing what is right,” she snapped, drawing her hands from her pockets to prop them on her waist, squaring off against him and wishing, not for the first time, that she stood taller than her five-foot-one height. Today’s wedge-heeled sandals weren’t helping much, either. “The information I pass along brings us one day closer to ending the war between the cartels.” One day closer to putting Théa’s soul to rest.

A shiver wracked her as dark memories pounded on the door to her mind. Her sister’s violent death was indelibly intertwined with the culmination of Ilda’s relationship with Casí—Casey—and the horrific fashion in which that relationship had ended. In explosions and fire, bullets and blood. “I mourned you.” She whispered the accusation, as there was no softness in her for him, not in this specific moment when she was forced to question everything she had known to be true for the past four years.

“No more than I mourned you,” but his murmured words didn’t carry the barbs hers had. “I would never have left Colombia without you, *fénix*.”

“Don’t call me that.” Her skin felt shrunken over her limbs, tight and itchy and not hers. Nothing about her body was hers in this moment, including her feet, which drove her toward him, to him. She stumbled as she tried to halt her forward momentum, but it was too late. His hand shot out to catch her elbow, steadying her with a callused grip that opened the floodgate to their shared past.

They both gasped at the contact.

She had known he wasn’t a simple thug from the moment they met in Pipe’s swanky box at the stadium. His eyes were too intelligent, his hands

too careful, and the heat that had forever existed between them flared to life. Her nipples hardened, pressing through the cups of her bra into visible points in her navy silk blouse. Sensual, sexual need as fresh as if they had been parted only yesterday swept through her, from her tight braid to her painted toenails.

He'd always been a big man, looming larger than his six feet with shoulders that blocked out the sunlight and an upper body packed so tight with muscle there wasn't a spare millimeter of softness to be found. How was it she looked at him now, four years later, and found him bigger, broader and a thousand times more dangerous to her person?

Did she know him at all? The answer was, of course, no. She'd never known him. He'd lied from the moment they had met. He'd lied all the way to the altar, but Ilda had loved him, with such reckless depth and promise that any qualms had been shoved aside in favor of a permanent fix of him.

She was as bad as any junkie when it came to this man she'd married, this stranger. And the threat he posed to her now—not violent but physical nonetheless—was potent enough to send her spiraling.

She'd been so good, she thought desperately. *So good.* After his death, she had prayed for forgiveness. She had devoted her life to family and good works and the Church and bettering her community, but here stood Satan incarnate, every delicious inch of him, tempting her into sin once more.

*But is it sin when he's your husband?* asked a smug voice inside her head. *The real sin would be to deny him his marital right. To deny herself.*

"You're touching me," she breathed, unable to silence the voice, her fear, her need. Oh, how she needed him. She ached between her thighs, the years apart disintegrating to dust as she remembered just how perfect the first slide of him into her had always been. The tug of tiny inner muscles, fluttering, stretching, holding him prisoner. And the sounds he'd made, the groans against her ear with his breath hot and panicked against her skin as he thrust into her, driving her up up up until—

*Hell.* She fought the urge to cross herself. Because she was about to sin, undeniably and without shame in this moment. "Casí."

"It's Casey."

A stranger. She'd married a stranger. "Cay-zee," she enunciated, trying to mimic his American pronunciation, before falling back into the rhythm of her own language, Spanish rolling off her tongue in a breathless rush. "If

you don't get me naked in thirty seconds, *marido*, I'm walking out of here, and you're on your own with Pipe."

A noise escaped his parted lips, pained, animalistic, shocking her into stillness as her eyes flew to his. His pupils were blown, his rugged face flushed with more than the heat of a Medellín afternoon, and he grabbed her with both hands, dragging her roughly against that big, bad body. "I never..." His low voice rumbled. "I *never* thought I'd hear that word again."

Her palms flattened on his chest, pressing harder when she felt the erratic thump of his heart. "What word?"

"Husband. You called me your husband, Ilda." A shudder rippled through him, and her, as he bent his head, lips hovering so close to hers that she could taste the salt and sweat and sweetness of him though they didn't kiss. Not yet. "I'm gonna reward you for that word so good, baby." Then his strong fingers gripped the panels of her blouse and ripped.

Buttons flew as his mouth crashed down over hers, and her whole world went up in flames. His lips were soft but firm, forcing her to open to him, to his hunger. He moved without finesse, ravenous for every nipped taste he stole, his need infecting her with identical madness. He groaned as he yanked away her ruined shirt, and she answered that thrilling noise with a starved moan of her own.

The years disappeared, old pain evaporating in an instant as he kissed her and she kissed him. Equal partners in the give and take—with far more take than give, until they fought one another for who could lick, bite, suck harder—their mouths a battleground where they met and clashed and struggled for dominance. Ilda didn't want to win, but she refused to surrender without drawing blood from the man who'd so utterly broken her heart with his death.

A sob caught in her throat as she shoved that terrible thought aside and laid her palms flat on the solid slabs of his chest. His skin sizzled under her touch, hot and perspiring, and she dragged her hands over all those delicious ripples and ridges until she reached the unbuttoned fly of his utility trousers.

"You gonna touch me, baby?" He licked a path along her jaw to catch her earlobe between his teeth, hips thrusting into her hands. "Do it. Put your hands on my cock and make me alive for the first time in years." His fingers made quick work of her bra before attacking the button at her waistband,

racing to get her naked with a desperation she more than recognized, and reciprocated.

Boldly gripping the thick length of his erection through his trousers, she squeezed him, hard, and laughed in delight when his big body trembled. “Oh, Casí, look at you shake.” With her thumb, she drew down the zipper and reached in to heft the significant weight of his arousal. Warm satin skin, insatiable hardness and the slick drip of pre-ejaculate easing her grip.

She grabbed his chin in her other hand and directed his mouth back to hers, losing herself in his kiss as a bubbling brightness, like sunshine, pushed against the insides of her bones, desperate to break free. If it did, would she disintegrate under its unbearable lightness? Would this stolen freedom be the end of her?

Fear coursed in her blood, but the nerves only heightened her reaction as he rid her of everything but her panties...and then those, too, disappeared with the swipe of one greedy hand. He didn't give her a chance to strip him before shimmying out of his trousers and briefs, needy little sounds leaving his lips as he kissed her wildly.

She remembered those sounds—he'd always been vocal in bed—but they affected her all the more now, standing naked together, soul mates and strangers in the same instant. Crazed by the knowledge that lived in her cells, she flung her arms around his neck and infused her kiss with every emotion running rampant through her vibrating limbs.

Casey wasn't the only one who shook.

His hands skated over her shoulders, her back and rib cage, until he bent and grabbed her by the thighs and, without any assistance from her whatsoever, lifted her off the floor, urging her legs to wrap around his waist. Linking her ankles over his backside, she squeezed him tight, aligning her upper body with his and whimpering at the sensation of her breasts pressed to his chest. It took him zero effort to hold her, and she loved that. Loved his obvious strength, loved the way he moved her where and how he wanted her simply because he could. Because he was in charge here, as he'd always been.

Sure, she had goaded him. Teased and flirted and flaunted until he'd lost control giving her what she wanted—his body. Those bossy hands and that dirty mouth, and a cock that had filled her better than any who came before him, and all that, combined with the intelligent gleam in his eyes, had done



her in. As soon as she waved her invisible white flag, he had taken the reins and never, ever loosened them.

She never, ever wanted him to.

Two strides brought them to the bed, and he knelt on the mattress, settling her none-too-gently to her back and letting his superior mass weigh them down. “Baby, baby,” he breathed past her lips as he slid one hand between their overheated bodies. “*Ilda.*” His touch found her, parted her and thrust hard inside her, filling her slick sheath with two blunt fingers.

She cried out, her spine arching off the bed, barely aware of him shifting down her body to suck her clitoris between his lips. His tongue flicked the tip, then suckled as though his life depended on making her clit the center of his world. He lapped at her folds, tasting the creamy arousal that elicited all number of rude noises, between the rough, masculine fingers playing her pussy and the wet warmth of his hungry mouth.

But this wondrous aggression was just rushed foreplay, and she didn’t mind one bit as he levered his body over hers, lined up the head of his cock with her entrance and thrust home.

He swore.

She chanted his name. Her fingertips scrabbled for a hold on his head, but that damn hair of his was too short, so she dug her nails into his shoulder blades and scraped. Yes, she wanted to draw blood. Yes, she wanted to leave marks.

Yes, she wanted to *punish*.

Both hands gripping the wooden headboard for leverage, he set a pounding pace, hips pumping into her with loud, rhythmic slaps, flesh on flesh, sweat against sweat. The bed lurched with every movement of his large body until the frame began to bang on the baseboard. His chest was a veritable wall above her, glistening with perspiration and flexing for her pleasure, working hard to push her to the edge she could sense him testing, already, so soon.

She wanted to push him over the edge, more than she wanted to breathe. So she poked, just a little, using her minuscule still-present consciousness to calculate what, precisely, would accomplish his fall. Because she needed him to fall. She needed him to *shatter*. “Fuck me harder. You know you can.” Leaning up, she licked at the salty trail of sweat dripping in the shallow valley between his pectorals. “You know how hard I can take it.”

He groaned, another one of those pained-animal noises, and panted. “So hard, isn’t that right, baby? You like my cock when it hurts us both a little.” Rolling his hips, he used that cock to find a certain spot inside her and applied pressure.

Whimpering, she raked her nails down the length of his back, on either side of his spine, and bit the bulging muscle over his rib cage offering sculpted contour on his beautiful body. The muscle gave beneath her teeth, enough to take the branded imprint she offered, and he shouted her name—*too loud*, warned that tiny corner of her brain, *too loud with her name*—as she licked her way to one flat brown nipple, sucking hard.

“Don’t forget the other one. Please,” he begged hoarsely. “Please suck the other one.”

She obliged, and he moaned, swearing in English, in Spanish, in some other language she didn’t recognize but thought might be Middle Eastern from the cadence of it. Then her ability to think at all disappeared as he released the headboard with one hand and ripped the elastic from the end of her braid. Her hair suddenly free, he wrapped the thick, curling strands around his fist until he reached the base of her skull. Spearing his fingers through the mass, he cupped her head in that one giant hand and held her to receive his kiss.

He took her mouth as though her lips were his property, or would become so given the proper persuasion. His tongue thrust in a naughty mimic of the treatment his cock was currently administering, and so well, too.

Her limbs went loose and liquid, a sure sign her orgasm lurked in the periphery, so she clung to him, open and finally surrendering, proud of the battle she’d waged. He’d earned her body, as he always did, and now she needed to succumb to the ownership he promised with every droplet of sweat that dripped from him to her, wet and hot and a true proof of life.

He tore his mouth from hers and stared straight into her eyes. “I don’t have enough fucking hands to touch you with, baby.” His jaw firmed. “But I’m going to goddamn try.” Releasing the headboard once and for all, he landed that hand between her breasts and trailed splayed fingers down the front of her body to tweak her clit, a particular petting that never failed to send her spiraling.

As her inner muscles fluttered in warning, he grunted and used his grip on her hair to yank her head back, revealing her throat to his licking, tasting

mouth. He didn't mark her as she had him, but she felt scarred all the same, old wounds bursting open as ecstasy spilled over every inch of her body.

Catharsis in every pore, she came, tears trickling from the corners of her eyes, and she scrabbled to hold him to her, take him into her body as deeply and unalterably as possible. "*Marido,*" she gasped through her sobs, losing her grasp on words, thoughts, everything but the angry emotions rioting in her chest. "*Marido, te amo.*"

He kissed the tears from her cheeks and jumped over the edge with her, his semen scalding her. It was enough to wake Ilda from her daze, so that when he shifted to lie beside her on the bed, she was already blinking through the aftershocks of a pleasure so inescapably real. His fingers curled around her wrist, slowly, tugging her to his side, but she resisted. Stiffening went against every impulse, every instinct. Her body screamed at her to go where he led her and cuddle against him. In the past, she would have. In the past, she wouldn't have let him roll off of her in the first place.

Aware that he permitted her to do so, when his greater strength could have pinned her down, Ilda wrenched herself away and off the bed. Silently, her breathing hectic, she scurried around the hotel room, yanking on her clothing as she found it. The missing buttons on her blouse forced her to knot the tails of her shirt over her belly, but when she turned to face the bed—and the naked, virile man sprawled across it—she felt far more in control. "I can't help you, Casey Faraday." The risks were too great, not only to her person but to the life she led in this city where she'd spent thirty-one years under the protection of the Marin cartel. That protection could disappear in an instant, and would the second Pipe learned she was an informant for a joint DEA-Interpol task force. "And you need to leave Medellín." Saying that *hurt*, like losing him all over again.

"I can't leave." He pushed up onto one elbow, eyes heavy-lidded as he watched her, but she didn't mistake his sated, slumberous gaze for relaxation. No, he saw her—maybe even saw through her. "The hostage...he's my brother. His name is Adam."

Unwillingly, Théa's smiling face darted through her mind, a happy memory from the night of the rehearsal dinner before her intended marriage to Pipe. Beautiful Théa, whose time on this earth had ended after only twenty-nine short years. "You're telling me Pipe is holding your brother captive."

“Yeah.”

Her voice lowered, and she crossed her arms protectively over her chest where the torn material of her blouse gaped. “He must know who you are, then.”

“I don’t think so.”

“But you don’t know.”

He hesitated. “No.”

“Do you understand how dangerous this is?” Realizing her hair was a mess, she combed harried fingers through the curls and quickly braided the mass of it again. Scanning the floor, she searched for the missing hair elastic, glancing up only when Casey cleared his throat. There, dangling from one finger, was the elastic, and she snatched it with a frown. “Do you know what you’re asking me to do?”

“I know, and I wish to God it wasn’t you I had to ask this of.” Sitting fully upright in the bed, he scrubbed one hand over his buzzed scalp, and it was only then that she noticed the utter exhaustion—that had nothing to do with sex—lurking in the lines of his face and body. “But I need a meet-cute with Pipe, and I can’t just show up like I’m looking for him. He has to think he stumbled upon me himself.”

Irritation flashed. “And once he *stumbles* upon you, what do you think he’s going to do, hmm? Just...welcome you back with open arms?”

Casey met her gaze directly. “No, he’ll probably beat the shit out of me.”

“Pipe doesn’t beat people.”

“No,” he agreed through clenched teeth. “He has thugs for that.”

“You were one of those thugs, once upon a time.” And a spy. She couldn’t afford to forget this fact. Against all better judgment, and before she could second-guess herself, she followed her handler’s orders, despite the sick gnawing in her stomach. “There is a nightclub here in the neighborhood, La Jaula de Oro. Pipe will be there tonight for the nine o’clock show, but he always arrives fifteen minutes early.”

Panic bubbled when he simply nodded. So. She’d done her duty. She’d made contact, gotten the American spy in with the big, bad drug lord as best she could and now...now she was done. Done with Faraday and his hostage brother, and done—again—with the Casí she’d impulsively married in a secret ceremony four years earlier, when she ought to have stayed firmly in mourning and never dared everything on a love based on lies.

Rushing to the door, she fumbled with the chain and the lock until the handle gave way, and she flung the portal open. She had to get out of here and never, *never* look back. Her past was dead, and certainly not gorgeously nude and well-sexed on a cheap hotel bed mere feet away from where she now stood.

“We’re not done, Ilda.”

The knot in her stomach twisted as she swallowed back stinging tears. “We’ve been done for years.” She slammed the door behind her.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Five

The back booth of La Jaula de Oro was a special kind of hell.

On the one hand, he sat far enough from the club's stage, with its intimate lounge-like setting, that he was nearly out of sight when those at the front of house looked his direction. On the other hand, his wife was up on that stage, and there was every possibility she was unaware of his presence.

Ilda. Alive. Casey didn't know whether he wanted to weep with happiness or vomit over how he'd spent the past four years—without her. And not only without her, but under the one-hundred-percent unshakable assumption that she'd died the day of their wedding.

His fingers clenched around the sweating beer bottle he'd ordered from the friendly waiter upon arriving at the club. Fuck. He'd *slept* with other women. Only a few, but that didn't matter. He had broken vows he'd had every intention of honoring for the rest of his life, and just because he hadn't been working with all the available information didn't mean he still shouldn't have held to those vows. But grief was a tricky, sticky thing, and bodies were different than hearts. His body had needed touch—he'd always been a physical man, his desires base and earthy—despite what his heart, his mind, had screamed at him.

After every instance where he'd found himself in bed with a woman who wasn't Ilda, he had been wrecked with sadness. Sometimes it would hit right away, as soon as the pleasure dissipated, before the sheets had cooled; sometimes the...the depression—because that's what this was, damn it, and maybe it was time he admitted to it—would arrive without warning, weeks after the fact, and sideline him in his cabin for days. Sleep seemed to be the only thing that healed him, and staring at her picture in his phone so as to not forget her smiling face, not ever.

And then he'd be fine. Throwing himself into his work, happy enough and smiling and doing what he had always done best: protecting others. Yet even now, as ecstatic and overwhelmed as he was to discover Ilda was alive, as earth-shattering as it had been to make love to the love of his life—like a dream, a wish he'd never believed would come true—Casey felt those

demons hovering again, feeding off of his guilt, his shame. He'd never have thought he could experience such excruciating happiness and still feel the dark taint of pain, like a sickly film clinging to his emotions.

It wasn't enough to send him crawling to his bed. It wasn't enough to distract him from this mission, or make him a liability to those around him...though that wasn't to say that someday he wouldn't be. But it *was* enough to convince him to sit down with the shrink when he returned to Boston and ask about the possibility of meds. His reticence to acknowledge what he saw as an intrinsic weakness didn't benefit anyone, least of all him.

For now, however, his head was firmly in the game, the darkness brutally locked down in a sequestered corner of his mind. Sipping the alcoholic beverage he didn't want but that his cover necessitated, Casey stared up at the woman onstage, a pang thudding through his heart. Perched on a simple stool, wearing an elegant but understated column of royal blue satin, Ilda gripped a microphone and crooned sensual lyrics of love in a time of death.

Her voice was a miracle. He'd always thought so, but new layers lived in her talent now. She had suffered loss and survived, and still she sang. Low and warm and beautiful and sincere, and not for the first time, he wished he had a better ear, so he could properly appreciate this rare gift of hers.

She was accompanied by a pianist, a hand drummer and a guitarist, but the spotlight focused solely on her, a jewel on that stage. He couldn't look away, which was the whole point, he supposed. But looking at her made his eyes sting, his breath catch and his chest ache, and he realized more than her voice was a miracle—Ilda herself was. He'd felt just how miraculous only a few hours earlier.

His dick hardened, and he shifted in his seat, the booth creaking beneath him as he tore his gaze from the stage and scanned the room. The club was tastefully decorated and incredibly clean, the waitstaff and bartenders in tidy all-black uniforms. He didn't remember this place from the last time he was in Medellín, but then, he'd not spent much time in the Parque Periodista neighborhood. His days had been tied up in Pipe's various activities, most of which centered around the hacienda—Pipe's sprawling estate on the city's outskirts, tucked into the hilly, wooded landscape and highly guarded. Casey had lived on the grounds while under with the cartel, as did most of the brigadiers, and only once had he spent the whole night away from his bunk.

The night of Pipe and Théa's rehearsal dinner. The night Ilda had asked him to stay. The night the Orras cartel had launched an offensive strike and murdered Théa as her escort delivered her to her downtown penthouse, mere hours before she and Pipe were to be married.

A dark day, leading to the darkest Casey had ever known. He didn't have all the pieces yet, couldn't put together the puzzle of his own wedding day and what had happened to Ilda. How she had survived. How he could have possibly left Colombia while she was still alive.

He'd never forgive himself for that.

Which explained why he had sent off a frantic request to Della as soon as Ilda had fled his hotel room, demanding satellite footage of the chapel for the twenty-four hours preceding and the forty-eight hours following his marriage. Luckily, his cousin had only treated him to minimal lip over his request and promised that the video would be in his inbox by tomorrow morning.

Until then, he had a job to do.

Another sip of beer, and his gaze flitted back to the stage. Ilda had finished the song and smiled softly at the appreciative applause that broke out, but Casey didn't join in. Not because she didn't deserve applause, but because clapping didn't fit with his cover as Cortez.

Casímiro Cortez had been a thug with a hard-on for machine guns and an inappropriate obsession with the boss's sister-in-law to-be. He'd proven himself a coward at the outbuilding four years earlier, when the spies were snatched and several brigadiers killed in the firefight ascribed to the Orras cartel. Presumed dead until now, Cortez had come back from the grave with his tail between his legs, and where else should he be but lurking creepily in the periphery of his ex-lover's place of employment?

Going in, Casey hadn't planned on using Ilda—but then, he hadn't known she was around to use. Being here made a sick kind of sense; Casey banked on the fact that Théa had let slip to Pipe the nature of Ilda's relationship with him before she'd died. He needed to appear lovesick, and desperate, and lounging angrily in the corner of the club was pretty desperately lovesick behavior, if you asked him.

No matter what Ilda had said, they weren't over. Not even close. She was his fucking Helen of Troy, and he'd raze this godforsaken country to the ground in order to get her back in his arms for good.



But first, he had to find Adam's scrawny ass and save it, no thanks to the man sitting alone at a small table to the right of the stage. Felipe Marin Donado wore a tailored suit, the jacket unbuttoned and white dress shirt opened casually at the throat. Pipe had always been a well-dressed man, his lean frame ideal for the current trend of slim-cut business wear, and despite the fact that he was in his mid-forties, he was incredibly fit. And strong. And, objectively speaking, handsome, his thick black hair just gone gray at the temples.

And staring up at Ilda, his smile was not the least bit brotherly.

Casey knew that look. Casey owned that look, damn it.

The most powerful man in Colombia—in South America, truth be told—watched Casey's wife as though she belonged to him. To Pipe. But...that wasn't possible.

It *couldn't* be possible.

Dread curled low in his stomach as he glowered at Pipe, for the moment uncaring how he appeared to the club-goers at large. Pipe's hand lay flat on the pristine tablecloth, fingers tapping along with the beat of the percussion, a single tea light working in conjunction with glow of the stage lights to cast his face with enough warmth to clearly display his expression. His mouth was curved, the lines at the corners of his eyes crinkling in genuine pleasure.

Fucking hell. Pipe was in love with Ilda.

Swallowing the black, possessive rage that threatened, Casey tossed back the rest of his beer and signaled the waiter. He couldn't afford to waste another moment, not when he was feeling so unstable—and hell, he probably ought to look into meditation classes when he got back home, too, just to be on the safe side.

Had he mentioned how much he hated Colombia? Because Jesus Christ.

The waiter approached. "Another Costeña, sir?" He moved to take the empty bottle from in front of Casey.

*Showtime.* Swiping his arm over the tabletop, Casey sent the beer bottle flying, enjoy the satisfyingly loud crash of breaking glass. "Not interested in your cheap beer, amigo," he growled, faking tipsiness. "How much for a bottle of top-shelf tequila?" Tossing down a handful of pesos, he crossed his arms over his chest and fixed the poor waiter with a belligerent stare.

The waiter scurried away without touching the bills, murmuring that he would return shortly, and Casey began the mental countdown. Heaving an irritated sigh, he pulled the burner phone from his pocket and focused every ounce of his attention on the screen, checking *fútbol* scores and shooting off a text in Spanish, which would ping off a program on Della's computer and send an automated response back to his cell, inane and untraceable.

A throat cleared to his left, and he looked up into the forbidding face of Manuel, Pipe's second-in-command...and one of the bastards who'd attacked Adam. "Cortez. You look pretty good for a ghost." He propped his hands on his hips, staring impassively. "Boss wants to talk to you."

Casey made a show of hesitating before pushing out of the booth, but Manuel didn't move out of his way. "What?" he snapped, as though he didn't know what was next.

Without a word, Manuel patted him down, starting with Casey's torso, then moving to his arms and his legs. Under normal circumstances, Casey was armed to the teeth with sidearms, knives and other tools, but as Cortez, he'd only ever carried a 9mm, tucked into the waistband of his cargos. Manuel relieved him of the pistol, tucking it into his own belt. "Follow me." He turned on his heel and walked toward the stage.

Casey trailed behind, praying he wouldn't be forced to sit at that table with Pipe, mere feet from where Ilda sang. But no, that wasn't what Pipe wanted either, because Casey saw him stand and blow a kiss—a motherfucking kiss—to her before disappearing around a black curtain to the right of the stage. Casey kept his gaze on the back of Manuel's head, battling with every step not to look at the goddess in blue satin, whose eyes he could feel on him for the first time since the hotel. *Don't look at me, baby. Please don't look.*

Manuel led him past the curtain behind which Pipe had disappeared and through the rear exit, dumping them out into an empty alleyway.

Except it wasn't empty. Pipe stood there, flanked by two brigadiers Casey didn't recognize. And he wasn't pleased. "Casímiro. I thought I'd buried you."

Before Casey could speak, Manuel slammed his leg against the back of Casey's knees, knocking him to the ground. His kneecaps screamed against the uneven concrete pavers, his hands shooting out to brace his fall and scraping roughly, tearing open the heels of his palms. Almost instantly,

Manuel grabbed him by the neck of his T-shirt, yanking backward so Casey knelt upright in front of Pipe. “I said, I thought I’d buried you.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t,” Casey muttered, knowing if he came on too subservient, Pipe wouldn’t believe him for a second.

Pipe nodded, and one of the brigadiers lumbered forward to plow his meaty fist into Casey’s gut, but Manuel’s choking hold on him kept him from folding into the punch. The pain doubled when a second blow joined the first, followed by a punishing uppercut along his jaw.

He bit his tongue, teeth snapping, and he grunted, trying to breathe through the burn but doing nothing to defend himself. If he’d thrown his arms up or fought back, no doubt the second brigadier would have laid into him, too. As it was, Casey could endure a beating, had known this was in store for him. Didn’t mean he enjoyed getting his ass handed to him, though.

Another couple of bruising blows along his ribs, and then the brigadier shifted back, leaving Casey panting heavily as he locked eyes with Pipe, an expression that could only be termed *disappointment* coloring Pipe’s aquiline features. Unwillingly, Casey felt a twinge to his conscience, which was pretty sick. But during his time with the Marin cartel, he’d had what he considered a good relationship with the merciless drug lord. Pipe rewarded loyalty and intelligence—so long as you weren’t *too* intelligent, of course—and Casey, as Cortez, had offered both. A part of Casey had actually respected the man for what he was: a steadfast leader and astute businessman. The cartel functioned with military precision, and Casey, as a former Army sergeant, appreciated the order and organization intrinsic to the Marin cartel.

That part of him disliked disappointing the man who was, essentially, his commanding officer, but he deserved it. Or rather, Cortez deserved it, and it was Cortez’s story he needed to sell. “You done beating on me?”

Unsurprisingly, that earned him a hard cuff on the head from Manuel, who still gripped the back of his shirt. Yet Pipe chuckled with real amusement. “You always were a mouthy bastard, Cortez,” he said lightly before sobering. “I was grieved by your death, my friend. Perhaps you care to tell me how it is you’re not in the grave in which we buried you.”

Casey swallowed hard, and allowed his arm to rest over his midsection, defensive and protective at once. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“That you mourned me.”

“I wasn’t the only one.” There was an edge to Pipe’s tone, but he didn’t elaborate, didn’t have to. Casey knew to whom he referred. “Tell me why we found your ID, your mobile, your gun on a body that apparently wasn’t yours.”

It was tough to confess weakness, even a fictional weakness. “I took a round in the stomach, thought I was gonna die.” He had the scars to prove it, though he’d received them in the years since escaping Medellín. But Pipe didn’t need to know that. “There were Orras soldiers everywhere.” Or rather, Faraday operatives dressed in the rival cartel’s colors. “Didn’t want to wait around to have my head blown in, and I knew your rules about capture.”

“Don’t get taken.”

“Don’t get taken,” Casey echoed gratefully. Despite the fact that suicide was a cardinal sin to a devout Catholic like Pipe, a brigadier putting a gun to his own head was preferable to the torture and beheading he’d suffer at the hands of the Orras cartel. “So I stripped my shirt and dumped my shit on a dead Orras soldier, took his and ran.”

Pipe seemed to consider this. “But you didn’t return to the hacienda. Why, if you knew you’d be safe there?”

Casey shook his head. “Never made it that far. I kept losing blood, and I passed out. When I woke up, I was in Orras territory—the shirt, you know? These farmers thought I was Orras and fixed me up, but it took a while. A few weeks, maybe. They were going to Barranquilla to see their grandson and... I took a ride. Then hopped my way to Maracaibo.”

“Going home, then.” Nodding, Pipe crossed his arms over his chest, expression thoughtful. “But you ran, Casímiro. You ran and stayed gone for four years. Did you spend it all nestled to the bosom of your family?”

Casey snorted derisively. “Fuck no. I mean, I stuck around through the holidays,” he rushed to assure Pipe when he caught his dark glance. Family was everything to Pipe, something he’d do well to remember. “My sister had a baby. My *abuela* got cancer.” He shrugged. “Needed to bring money in again, so I caught up with Josef Seijas. He had work for me.”

“Josef Seijas,” Pipe repeated, obviously recognizing the name of the son of a noted Venezuelan gun runner. “And if I call him, he will confirm this?”

Hell yes, Josef would confirm it, considering he was CIA and owed Casey a favor of the life-and-death variety. Shrugging casually, Casey nodded. “If you can get in touch with him. He’s in jail awaiting trial for knocking over a US military convoy in Nicaragua.” Not that this would prevent Pipe from contacting Josef. Besides, a call from Pipe Marin would liven up Josef’s current mandatory stay in La Modelo prison. “I was with him for that job. It’s why...” He trailed off and let his gaze fall from Pipe’s.

Pipe didn’t disappoint. Stepping closer, he crouched down until he and Casey were eye level, and his cultured voice, when it came, was gentle. “It’s why what, *niño*?”

Inside, Casey smiled. He was in. “It’s why I came back here. I have... I have cargo that I can’t take home.”

“What cargo?”

Slowly, Casey lifted both hands. “I need my phone. May I...?” At Pipe’s nod, Casey carefully reached into his pocket to retrieve the cell, and opened to the picture he needed. He handed the phone to Pipe. “Here.”

For a long moment, Pipe crouched there, staring at the phone and occasionally tapping the screen to zoom in. Then he stood, waving a hand at Manuel, and the angry fist at Casey’s collar disappeared. Taking that as permission, he shoved to his feet, wincing at bruise already forming along his ribs. He didn’t think the brigadier had broken them, but damn, the dude had certainly done his duty.

Abruptly, Pipe offered the phone back to Casey. “Those are legit?”

“Taken from the bed of a Marine command vehicle. There’s a reason they didn’t extradite Josef to America—the military doesn’t want it getting out that they lost control of this particular shipment.”

“And you have it.” Pipe’s tone wasn’t doubting, per se, but needing that final confirmation.

*Hook and line, meet sinker.* “In my hotel room. Hoping you want it.”

“Why me?”

Casey pocketed the phone, shifting his weight. “What am I gonna do with that shit, Pipe—start a war? *Win* a war? Not my game. I figure you’d know what to do with product this hot, and thought that...you know. Maybe I could...come back?” He accompanied this quiet plea with a cautious glance first at the brigadiers, then at Pipe. “I still need to send money home, and Josef isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. If you know of something I could

do, for you? It doesn't have to be big, or like it was before. But I've got family depending on me."

Unbuttoning his suit coat, Pipe pushed it back, settling his hands on his hips and considering Casey with a hard gaze. "You remember how to get to the hacienda?" When Casey nodded, Pipe extended his hand, ostensibly to shake, but when Casey took it, Pipe's grip turned cruel. "I have no use for a coward in my organization, Cortez, and make no mistake, a coward is what you are. You ran from your brothers-in-arms and your responsibilities, and you've lost my trust."

"I understand," Casey murmured, solemn and seemingly repentant.

"Bring your stolen property to the hacienda tomorrow morning at nine. If it checks out, maybe we can talk."

Adrenaline tore through him. One step deeper into the cartel meant one step closer to Adam. "Yes, Pipe."

Releasing his hand, Pipe buttoned his jacket again and adjusted his cuffs, every inch the moneyed gentleman. One of the brigadiers opened the door to the club, Ilda's voice drifting out, and Pipe paused with a foot on the threshold. "Oh, and *Casí*?"

Casí. The name that only Ilda had ever called him, and there it was on Pipe's tongue, brutal and mocking. Casey's sore jaw tightened.

The drug lord shot him a cold smile. "Come back to this club, and I'll kill you myself."

## Chapter Six

*You're a dirty little sinner.*

Ilda cringed at the gleefully accusing voice in her head and took another bite of *huevos pericos*, letting the savory mix of egg, onion and tomato scooped atop a flat cornmeal arepa melt on her tongue. Maybe if she kept her mouth busy, she wouldn't be tempted to confess just how dirty yesterday's sinning had been.

Very dirty, that's how. That big, muscled body working hard over hers, sweating and thrusting and stretching her so intimately. Big everywhere, was Casí—Casey—from his shoulders to his hands to his thick cock. Her sex clenched with the memory, the current emptiness an acute loss.

Mother Mary, she shouldn't be wanting this right now, at the wooden trestle table in the family breakfast room of Pipe's sprawling hacienda. Morning sunlight streamed through the wall of glass-paned doors, some of which stood ajar in their arched frames to encourage the gentle flow of crisp fresh air throughout the room.

She and Pipe occupied two chairs at the eight-seat table, the staff having prepared their usual scrumptious spread, more food than two hungry adults could ever possibly eat at a single meal. Another nibble of arepa kept her jaw from clamping shut. No outward tells, that was the rule. She couldn't afford to let Pipe see evidence of her fraught psyche, and Lord knew if she didn't inhale her typical morning meal, along with her mug of coffee, glass of milk and small tumbler of fresh-pressed juice, Pipe would grow suspicious.

Ilda adored breakfast.

At least, she adored it on a normal day, but nothing was normal anymore. Casí—Casey—was alive. Her husband. Her *secret* husband. What Pipe didn't know could spell disaster for them all, and hurt people in the process. Arrogant and deadly, Pipe did not suffer betrayal lightly, and the consequences for said betrayers were painful and long-lasting.

Ilda had never shown him an ounce of her fear, and she didn't intend to start now. "Don't forget, we have an interview with the school tomorrow

morning. Ten o'clock." She sipped her coffee, gaze trained on the stunning view through the doors. Wooded hills surrounded the hacienda, a mass of vibrant green rolling beneath a perfect blue sky slowly surrendering to the myriad earth tones marking Medellín's city limits.

"I won't forget, *querida*."

"You sound so grim."

Pipe sighed audibly. "I suppose I'm not ready for my princess to be old enough for school."

Shifting, she smiled at him over the rim of her mug, taking in his scowling face. "We agreed that we couldn't put it off any longer." Her smile widened as she turned her attention to the dark-haired three-year-old on his lap who was happily chomping away at a *buñuelo*, oblivious to the adult conversation going on around her. "Weren't you the one who said she would benefit from socialization?" Her tone was light, teasing.

"I've changed my mind."

Ilda gave a genuine laugh at the gruff petulance in his voice as she spooned yogurt from the serving bowl into a small dish and placed it in front of the pair of them. The little girl in his lap glanced up at her and beamed before taking hold of the dainty child's spoon Pipe offered her.

As always when she looked at her daughter, Ilda's heart expanded nearly to the point of bursting, aching pressure pushing against the inside of her rib cage in an effort to escape. There was nothing like it in the world, this love for her child. It was consuming and radiant and petrifying, all at the same time, and Ilda would not trade the heady sensation for anything. Beautiful little Arlo Beatriz was worth every moment of pain, physical and emotional, that had brought her into this world.

Arlo's straight brown-black hair, so different than Ilda's light mass of curls, was pulled back in a topknot she'd already managed to muss, her blunt-cut bangs framing a round face and drawing attention to big, alert eyes that took in every detail of their surroundings...except when she was focused on food, as she was right now on her yogurt.

Arlo was her mother's daughter after all. Perhaps love of breakfast was a genetic trait.

This morning, Arlo had insisted on wearing turquoise rain galoshes—though no rain was in today's forecast—with a taffy-pink shirt under short orange overalls, baring the twin bandages with purple paw prints decorating



her knees. The girl was a speed demon, dashing around the property like a whirligig, and more often than not taking a spill on the courtyard cobblestones. Unlike other children Ilda had observed, however, Arlo never bothered to remain prone on the ground, crying. No, she hopped back up and continued to run, even if she was bleeding. The most recent set of knee scrapes came courtesy of a chase with Pipe's aging terrier mutt, Cerdito.

Cerdito had won that game, but gifted Arlo with the consolation prize of his drooling tongue all over her grinning face.

Despite the eyesore that was Arlo's color palette for the day, Ilda couldn't look away, nor could she keep from smiling. "Her classes will only be for half a day," she murmured reassuringly to the man who kept one stabilizing hand on Arlo's waist.

Dark eyes met hers, wry self-directed humor alive in the brown depths. "But that is half a day when she won't be here with us. You know I'm no good at letting go."

A pang of compassion plucked at Ilda's heartstrings, for all that those strings were twisted in a complicated knot when it came to this man. "Better than you think, Felipe." Reaching out, she covered Pipe's hand, the one resting near the bowl of yogurt in case breakfast got a little wild, squeezing gently. "So you'll be at the meeting?" she prompted again.

He turned his hand beneath hers and briefly linked their fingers. "I wouldn't miss it," he said soberly, then bounced Arlo lightly in his lap to make her look up at him.

When she did, he plucked the spoon from her small fist, used a napkin to wipe away a blob of yogurt at the corner of her mouth and proceeded to brush the crumbs of an earlier muffin from the front of her overalls. Giggles erupted when Pipe tickled her ribs before she wriggled into a standing position atop his legs and threw her short arms around his neck, peppering his clean-shaven face with kisses.

Ilda caught the bemused expression on Pipe's face as he hugged Arlo in return, as though—even though it had been more than three years since Arlo had prematurely entered their world—he still couldn't quite believe she was his to care for, his to protect, his to love.

Her lungs seized, and she drew her hands beneath the table, where no one would notice them shaking. Her skin burned where he'd touched her, an indictment of her behavior yesterday. Behavior that should, by any

definition, constitute infidelity, the conflict roiling within threatening to rip her apart.

This was all Casey Faraday's fault. He was the reason she'd lost her appetite, sat mired in unsettling guilt and too confused over the metric ton of unanticipated truth bombs that had been dropped over the past twenty-four hours. If she thought too hard, she could feel her identity and the careful life she'd built start to disappear. She feared that, should she glance down, she might witness her fingers fade away. It seemed logical to her, that her physical body would reflect her loss of self.

So Ilda clung to what she knew in the here and now, and the shaky foundation she'd laid brick by tenuous brick with Pipe since their shared tragedy, followed so soon by Arlo's painful, joyful birth. "I'm finalizing the menu for the dinner party. Do you have any requests before I talk to the chef?" she asked, reaching for a pitcher of grapefruit juice and pouring herself a small glass.

"So long as there's *torta de natas* for dessert, I'll be happy." He clucked his tongue at Arlo, steadying her with both hands as she devoted single-minded focus to his hair, stubby fingers attempting to twist and braid the once neatly combed strands.

Ilda watched the two of them together with a painful knot beneath her sternum. He sat there so casually, this man the world vilified, and let his *niñita* do whatever the hell she wanted, uncaring who noticed his obvious doting. No better father, she told herself, more assertively than usual. Her baby girl had won the lottery when it came to papas. "I'm nervous about this dinner, Felipe." Ilda shifted her gaze to the pretty pink grapefruit juice in the cut-crystal tumbler, swirling the liquid with restless fingers.

"Nothing to be nervous about, *querida*." Pipe reached for the mobile phone next to his coffee mug, tapping at the screen, scrolling with his thumb, his mind clearly already on his workday. "I'm going to bring peace to Medellín. This dinner is the first step."

It might be the first step, but it was a dangerous one. Pipe had invited the leaders of the Orras cartel to the hacienda a few days from now for what could only be described as *détente*. Magnanimous of him, which was obviously the point, but Ilda wasn't so forgiving. The rival cartel was responsible for Théa's death—they'd killed in cold blood, on the side of the road.

The thought of *Ciro Orras* and his merry band of thugs sitting around her supper table, eating the dishes she'd planned, thanking her for passing the butter dish...it made her sick. It made her tremble in her seat, her skin prickling in nauseating waves, because there was every chance in the world that she would have to smile politely at the bastard who pulled the trigger on *Théa*.

But *Pipe* had demanded this dinner, and *Ilda's* presence as its hostess, and *Pipe's* word was law. Not only at the hacienda, but in this city.

He glanced up from his phone to spear her with a searching look. Whatever he saw on her face softened his expression, and he set the mobile aside. "Trust me, *Ilda*. I know what's best for us. This is how we finally move past our grief."

For a moment, her heart softened. *Pipe* had suffered as deep a loss as *Ilda* with *Théa's* murder four years ago. Their engagement had been Colombia's fairy-tale romance, for all that the prince of the story was a dangerous drug lord. The country had watched their courtship unfold through paparazzi photos and media interviews, and their wedding would have been a gilded, lavish dream. Little wonder that *Théa's* shocking death threw all of *Medellín* into mourning, their beloved pop princess meeting a tragic, senseless end.

*Medellín* had forgotten about *Ilda* in the aftermath, focusing instead on *Pipe* and *his* grief, and for that she would always be grateful. She'd always been the harmony to *Théa's* melody, the steady support to *Théa's* wild ways. Of course it was *Théa* who'd fallen in love with the most dangerous man in the world, and of course it was *Théa* who had been his most vocal proponent, citing all of the good *Pipe* had done not only for their city but their country, as well. He had been her hero, and he'd adored her for it.

*Ilda* didn't adore *Pipe*. She saw him for exactly what he was, had always done even when *Théa* was alive. But somehow, despite her lack of blinders, she had let her guard down with him. So much so that...well. The glittering platinum-set engagement ring on her third finger said it all, didn't it?

"I do trust you." Scooting her chair away from the table, she held out her arms. "All right, hand over our hair-dressing princess. I see you sneaking glances at your phone—I'm sure you've got plenty of work to do."

"You have no idea," he said mildly as he stood, moving around the table to deposit a wriggling *Arlo* in *Ilda's* lap. "But all that work is what makes

this possible.” Cupping her face in his capable hands, Pipe bent and pressed his lips to hers in a quick, affectionate kiss that ratcheted up the anxiety stuttering her lungs. His thumbs brushed over her cheekbones, his face hovering close above her. “When are you going to let me back in your bed, *querida*?”

She released a tense breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding. “Felipe…”

Crouching down in front of her, Pipe settled a hand on her knee, the other on Arlo’s. “Six months. It’s been six months since we made love, and I’ve respected your wishes on this. I know I made a mistake.”

“You slept with another woman.”

“A mistake, Ilda. How long will you punish me for this?” His phone vibrated against the hardwood tabletop, but he ignored it in favor of staying at her feet, suit jacket open and collar unbuttoned in a way that just screamed Money and Power. At age forty-four, combined with his lean swimmer’s build and his darker *mestizo* coloring, if he hadn’t been a criminal, he would most certainly be listed as one of the world’s most eligible bachelors. She wasn’t the least bit surprised that he’d surrendered to temptation and had drunken sex with one of the desperate young things that swarmed the cartel-owned clubs like flies.

That didn’t mean she had to tolerate it, though. “I’m not trying to punish you,” Ilda murmured, honestly. “I just keep wondering if you wouldn’t be happier as a free man.”

“Never.” He took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips, his thumb toying with the engagement ring. “You and Arlo are my happiness.” There was something so earnest in his gaze. “I want to come back to you, Ilda. You know I won’t stray again.”

She didn’t know that, and in all honesty, she doubted he’d stay faithful if they married. She was a placeholder, a poor substitute for the woman he would have promised his everlasting fidelity to. Théa. “Let’s get through this dinner first?” And perhaps by that time, she’d know what she planned to do about Casí—Casey—too.

“That I can do.” Pipe smiled up at her, pleased. “What are your plans for the day, *querida*?”

“A meeting with the Ladies Auxiliary at the church.” That she was dreading, but her feelings, positive or otherwise, had nothing to do with

why she chaired the event committee with Medellín's nosiest wives. "The Ascension Day charity auction is Friday night. Black tie—don't forget."

"I won't." He squeezed her hand. "How would you feel about a few days on the islands when this week is over? I'll call Renata, have her open up the villa. Just the three of us, family time—you, me, Arlo."

The Islas del Rosario were the first place Pipe had taken Ilda after Arlo was born, the first time he'd told her he loved her. She found herself nodding. "That sounds nice."

"It does, doesn't it?" He stood to plant another kiss on her, this one deeper, with a lick of heat...and she strove not to tense at the intimacy that was nothing at all like what she'd so illicitly shared yesterday with—

A throat cleared from the interior doorway separating the dining room from the hall. Pipe ended the kiss with a leisurely lift of his head, but all relaxation left his body as he took in their visitors. Immediately, he placed himself between her and the newcomers, but Ilda didn't need to see his face to know who'd just walked in and destroyed their peaceful morning.

"Why the hell did you bring him in here?" Pipe demanded through gritted teeth.

"You said to text when he arrived." The voice belonged to one of the newer brigadiers, Eddy Jimenez—one of the newer, and one of the dumber. "I texted but you didn't answer, so..."

Even as unease descended, Ilda spared a pitying thought for poor, dumb Eddy and his short-lived career in the Marin cartel.

"Out," Pipe snapped. "Wait for me in the courtyard." He shifted then, only slightly, but it was enough. Enough for her to glimpse the two men standing at the opposite end of the table, one appearing properly chastened and one her dead husband.

Panic. That's what this horrible frozen stiffness was, turning her limbs to stone and making Arlo squirm uncomfortably within her embrace. She was torn between grabbing her daughter and making a mad dash into the kitchen or staying so still in her seat she might never attract notice, like a wild animal who knows it's about to lose its freedom by evolving, unwillingly, into prey.

She suddenly regretted every bite of breakfast, terror churning in her stomach. None of which was helped along any by Arlo's bony, bandaged

knee jabbing into her side as she fidgeted, obviously having sensed the skyrocketing tension. *Don't make a sound, baby girl. Don't make him look.*

Though, to Casey's credit—and no doubt due to his spy training—he didn't take his eyes off of Pipe. “Señor Marin.” His voice, so different from Pipe's and so jarring to actually hear aloud after years of believing she'd never hear it again, stayed deferent and neutral.

Good. He was smarter than Dumb Eddy, it seemed.

He'd shown deference to Pipe back in the day, of course, but in no memory did she recall hearing him refer to his boss as señor. Pipe was Pipe, whether you respected him or not, and the man himself hardly expected to be called otherwise. His name inspired fear, and awe, and sometimes a little disbelief.

On a global scale, Pipe's criminality was a stark thing, easily labeled by various governments and law enforcement agencies. Here in the city, however, it was different. Pipe took care of the people under his protection. He helped them find work. He made sure they received medical care. He kept petty crime at bay and imposed harsh consequences for those who committed assault, rape or murder. He had the *policia* in his pocket, which benefitted not only him but the community as a whole. Cartel life was neither safe nor happy, but everyone knew it would be far worse if the Orras family had remained in charge.

So, no, Pipe wasn't a good man, but he operated by a code. Respecting that code was synonymous with respecting him, which was why he'd never demanded a weighty honorific from his brigadiers, past or present. That Casey offered him a señor meant he knew how badly he'd messed up.

Except not even Pipe knew how badly Casey had messed up. Hell, he still believed his name to be—

“Cortez. You're empty-handed.”

“I left it outside.”

“Then outside we shall go.” Pipe gestured toward the hall, to the foyer and open-air courtyard that lay beyond, and both Casey and Eddy turned to go, neither of them daring to glance past Pipe to where she sat.

**CRASH.**

Ilda's grapefruit juice went flying. In her panic, she'd stopped paying attention to Arlo and hadn't noticed her sneaky hands reaching for the table—and for the tempting glass of pretty pink juice.

The burst of sound stopped all three men in their tracks. Pipe frowned, concerned. “*Querida?*”

Ilda snapped into mother mode. “It’s nothing. Just a spill.” Rising, she settled Arlo in her abandoned seat and handed the girl a cloth napkin, miming wiping her hands with it. Having set her to her task, Ilda began locating bits of broken glass scattered across the tabletop and dropping the shards safely onto her plate. Soon enough, the staff was there, shooing her away, and she turned and knelt to help her daughter clean the last of the stickiness from her fingers.

“A new addition to your family, Pipe?” Casey’s casual question reached her ears, and her spine stiffened with dread.

Pipe answered, paternal pride in every syllable. “My daughter, Arlo Beatriz.”

Casey cleared his throat. “*Hola, Arlo.*”

Arlo didn’t look in his direction.

A beat passed. “Shy, is she?”

“Not shy,” Ilda said, cursing her mouth with every word, because hell if she knew why she couldn’t keep quiet at this, the most vital of moments in which her silence mattered. “Deaf.” Patting Arlo’s knee, she pointed to Casey and mimed waving hello.

A few slick strands of dark hair escaped to brush her round cheeks as Arlo turned in the seat of the chair to lift both arms in a happy hello to the big man who’d gone pale the second she faced him.

Ilda’s heart stuttered in her chest. That was her beautiful baby—trusting and friendly to everyone with whom she came into contact. But while she might not be able to hear tone of voice, Arlo could certainly read expression, and her innocent smile faded the longer she looked at Casey.

“Arlo,” he said, rough, and his eyes flicked to hers before snapping back to Arlo. “That’s a pretty name.”

Ilda swallowed. “Thank you.” A full-body shiver wracked her, but she held it together, still kneeling in front of the chair, one hand on Arlo’s leg. She noticed Pipe’s gaze on her, questioning, and shook her head. She was fine. She was absolutely *fine*.

“Congratulations.” Shock and fury, wonder and hunger sprinted across Casey’s face before he managed to school his expression, a split second before Pipe looked at him again. “A child is a blessing.”

“Indeed. Now, come,” Pipe demanded, his tone brooking no disobedience, and the men went, one by one into the hall, and she swore she neither noticed nor cared that Casey’s gaze as he turned from her screamed bloody murder.

As soon as they left the room, Ilda shot to her feet, gasping, eyes blurring with the sting of unshed tears. Snatching Arlo from the chair, she strode to the wall of glass doors and out onto the patio, gulping in the fresh morning air and letting it soothe her seizing lungs. “Oh, God. Oh God oh God oh God.” Every inch of her body shook, hurt, the tears now slipping down her cheeks burning like acid over her skin.

Small hands patted her face, wiping at the wetness, and Ilda turned her head to offer Arlo a watery smile. Even knowing Arlo couldn’t hear, she spoke, seeing how her baby focused on her lips, and she knew that starting classes at the newly opened Escuela Infantil para Sordos was the right thing to do. “It’s okay, darling girl. It’s all going to be okay.” She stroked a calming hand up and down Arlo’s back, swaying back and forth as she’d done when Arlo was a screaming, colicky infant. “We are going to be okay.”

But who was she trying to convince here? Arlo wouldn’t care, didn’t know, but Ilda was, officially, terrified. Her walls were shaking in their foundations.

He’d seen her. Casey had seen Arlo, and he had known.

Ilda thought she might vomit.

“Isobel!” Sticking her head through the door, she called again for the nanny. “Isobel, I need you!” Shifting Arlo’s weight to one arm, Ilda swiped away her tears and focused on her breathing. The view from the patio, high atop the hill and overlooking the rolling wooded acres Pipe owned as part of this massive, sprawling property, was as stunning as ever, and after several moments, Ilda finally saw it clearly. A shame that clarity didn’t extend to her chaotic, fear-driven thoughts.

Finally, Arlo’s nanny appeared. Isobel Garcia had been a childhood friend of Ilda and Théa growing up in the 13, a *comuna* overrun by gang activity. Ilda and Théa had lost their parents to gang violence in their teens and moved away from the district to live with an uncle who taught guitar through one of the Musica de Medellín city programs, but they had stayed in touch with Isobel. When the sisters had formed Almángel, they’d hired Isobel as an assistant, pulling the young woman out of a life dictated by



neighborhood violence and bloodshed. While Théa's murder had been the death knell for Almángel and Ilda's professional music career, Isobel had stayed on to help Ilda through her pregnancy, eventually becoming Arlo's nanny.

Isobel was the only person on the hacienda whose loyalty was first to Ilda and not to Pipe. Though Pipe now paid her salary, it was Ilda who had safeguarded her future through a series of investments made when Isobel had first started working for the Almeidas. No matter what happened to Ilda, Isobel would never need to return to the 13, nor depend on cartel benevolence.

Gathering Arlo in her arms, Isobel gave Ilda a hard stare. "You look awful."

"You're wonderful for my ego."

Isobel snorted a laugh before sobering again. "It's because that man is back."

Ilda didn't pretend not to know whom Isobel meant. "How do you know about him?"

"Passed him in the courtyard on my way here." A shrug lifted Isobel's sturdy shoulders. "I remember how you were with him, back in the day. Except...didn't he die?"

"Apparently not."

Dropping kisses all over Arlo's face—much to the little girl's giggling delight—Isobel digested that statement before coming to a conclusion. "You need to stay far away from him, *chica*," she said in a serious tone Ilda hadn't heard from her friend since Théa's funeral. "I know you, I know your big soft heart, but he isn't worth the trouble he'll bring you if you open up that heart to him again." Then she brightened, like a flipped switch, and dipped Arlo as though they tangoed. Arlo squealed happily. "Come on, *bebita*. We've got a city of building blocks with your name on it in need of renovation." And then with a wave to Ilda, her daughter and her nanny disappeared into the house.

Again, Ilda turned to stare out over the vista, hands propped on her hips as she took the time she needed to craft a mask over her emotions, but it was harder than she remembered. She hadn't needed a mask in so long—not once in four years.

*Dios*, but she hated him.

Smoothing her hands over the flounces of her demure amethyst cotton sundress, Ilda took one last breath and entered the dining room, skirting the table to head down the hall toward the grand foyer. Her purse sat on a decorative escritorio, and she slung the bag over her shoulder, sliding on a pair of sunglasses before stepping out into the sunshine of the southern courtyard. She knew Pipe and Casey would congregate in the larger courtyard to the north of the main entrance, so she ran no risk of crossing paths with them, for which she was forever grateful.

She headed for the garage and her armed guard of a chauffeur. Franco had been driving her anywhere she wished to go since the incident at the chapel four years ago. He was in his mid-fifties and had been Pipe's own driver for nearly two decades, until Pipe had decided Ilda needed Franco more. "Señora," he said now with a kindly smile that belied the fact that he reported her every movement to her fiancé. "To the Ladies Auxiliary meeting?"

"You know my schedule better than I do, Franco," she responded lightly, climbing into the back of the armored Escalade through the door he held open for her. "Want to take my place with the gossiping biddies today?"

He laughed and closed the door on her, then climbed into the driver's seat. "You could not pay me enough, señora."

"I figured."

They said nothing more as he drove her through the hacienda's steel-enforced gates and steered the SUV down the winding road that quickly gave way to the poverty-stricken outskirts of Medellín's mountainside districts. Located in the heart of the city, the church at which Ilda attended mass every Wednesday and Sunday was a solid forty-five-minute drive from the hacienda. Nuestra Señora del Sangrado Corazón had been the spiritual home of the Almeida family for generations, and despite Ilda's complaints about the other women on the committee, she loved her church and the community it had always provided her.

Pulling around to the rear entrance, Franco hopped out to open her door. "Two hours, señora?"

Ilda glanced at the slender gold bracelet watch latched around her wrist and sighed. "Better make it three. No doubt Eloisa Flores has a catered luncheon planned."

With an understanding smile—because Franco’s wife had been subject to the manicured whirlwind that was Eloisa Flores on more than one occasion—Franco walked Ilda to the steps of the church and saw her inside before bidding her a quiet adios. Quickly, Ilda moved through the tiled side hall toward the front of the building to the entrance of the sanctuary. She paused long enough to genuflect beneath the cross before walking past the pews to the confessional.

It didn’t matter that Father Ranier wasn’t taking confession today; someone besides the elderly priest was waiting inside to hear her sins.

Closing the booth’s wooden panel behind her, she knelt before the grille and listened for the steady breathing signaling a presence on the priest’s side of the box. He was there, and she exhaled slowly, shuddering relief flooding her as she made the sign of the cross. “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It has been three days since my last confession.”

“Three days?” The melodic baritone was friendly, amused. “How could you have sinned in only three days’ time, my child?”

“You’d be surprised, Father.” And she launched into the details surrounding the upcoming dinner with the Orras cartel, something she hadn’t been able to share with her DEA handler when they’d last met, two weeks prior. The church provided them the perfect cover in which to meet on a regular basis, since Ilda had scheduled events with the Ladies Auxiliary committees here all the time.

But she paused halfway through, linking her fingers through the pattern of the grille and letting the iron bite into her flesh. “Can...can I offer a real confession?”

Her handler chuckled. “So long as you remember I’m not a real priest. There’ll be no absolution coming from me.”

“But you will keep my secrets.”

“Always.” His vow was low, intense and based on two years of trust between handler and informant.

Ilda took a deep breath. “Then I need to tell you about a ghost. I need to tell you about Casímiro Cortez.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Seven

Fucking hell. Casey was a father.

*A dad.*

Pain unlike any he'd ever before experienced had shredded his chest the moment he saw Ilda hovering over the little girl, tending to her with obvious maternal concern, and heard Pipe claim the child as his daughter. His daughter *with Ilda*. Judging by her age, Ilda must've waited all of, what, a month before falling into Pipe's arms? Rage had choked him, then faded into something resembling pity when the girl's deafness was revealed.

But it wasn't pity because their child suffered from a disability. It was pity because that poor child would never hear her mama's gorgeous voice. Even in the midst of his turmoil, Casey had been able to recognize what a tragedy that was. Instinctively, he knew it must pain Ilda terribly, to sing her baby to sleep to no effect, and he was desperate with the need to comfort her. She was *his* wife, damn it, and that meant she was his to hold, to protect, to soothe away her tears.

Worse than the chest pain, though, was the heartbreaking wonder the moment the girl—*Arlo Beatriz*—turned and looked at him. And he'd died. He'd just straight-up died on the spot.

Because eyes like his mother's, eyes Sofia had passed on to all her children but him, had stared back at him. On Arlo, they were almost eerie, too big and pale silver-gray for her dark coloring, but his breath had strangled as his instincts made the connection his mind struggled to. *Beautiful baby*. A small face with his Moroccan heritage stamped all over it, from the straight dark hair to the ears with slightly pointed tips sticking out from her head ever so slightly, like a tiny little elf. His own dusky skin tone had lost the battle with Ilda's luscious toffee-caramel, along with the rounded cheeks and dimpled smile Casey had fallen for so quickly and so irrevocably.

Standing in the dining room, he felt himself fall in love all over again, new and different and horrible as his limbs shook with faint tremors from

holding his body in check. Playing a role. He was playing a role, and it was life or death that he succeed—not just his life, but his brother’s.

And now not just his brother’s, but his *daughter’s*.

Fuck. The heart wasn’t built to withstand this much emotional upheaval, not in this brief a time. It had only been a matter of hours, not days, since learning Ilda still lived, and that he’d left her behind four years ago. He couldn’t forgive himself for that, but neither was he certain he could forgive Ilda for moving on, and with her dead sister’s fiancé, no less.

Oh, yes. Casey had noticed the engagement ring taunting him from her third finger. She’d moved on, and how.

She was *sleeping* with that bastard. She was letting him put his bloodstained, kidnapping hands on her. Had they been together last night, after Casey had been inside her? Shit. *Shit*, his stomach rolled at the thought, able to picture it all too clearly. Jealousy raged within him, violent and hungry and ready to tear limbs from bodies.

Pipe must know he wasn’t Arlo’s biological father, just as he must have discerned by now that Casey, in his alter-ego of Cortez, was. The fury that had twisted the older man’s features when Eddy Jimenez led Casey into the dining room was understandable now. Pipe protected what was his, ownership Casey had forfeited with his deception and abandonment.

He wasn’t fucking forfeiting it anymore.

But he needed to remember his priorities. Adam. Adam had been beaten, kidnapped and might be subject to torture at this very moment, and Casey had promised his family that he would bring the youngest Faraday home safely. The situation with Ilda—and Arlo—was a problem of Casey’s own making, and not his mission. Which meant anything Casey intended to do about them couldn’t interfere with his search for Adam.

Casey loved his kid brother, same as he loved Bethie and Gillian and Tobias. But a *daughter*. God, it was the last thing he’d expected, a responsibility he’d never thought to bear, and knowing Arlo existed caused him such acute and sudden joy that he had barely been able to leave the dining room and trail Jimenez and Pipe into the hacienda’s northern courtyard, his knees were so weak.

“Cortez.”

Casey fought not to stiffen. Why was it so hard this time to pretend? He’d been good at his undercover work—one of the best—but he felt

dangerously out of control, gnashing his teeth against the idiotic urge to pull his gun, shoot every man on the property and whisk his innocents away to safety, subtlety be damned. “Yeah?”

Pipe pulled a pair of Ray-Bans from inside his jacket, shielding his eyes behind reflective mirrors as he stared out at the vista visible beyond the courtyard’s columned walls. “You forget everything you just saw inside. Understand?”

Everything. Meaning the existence of a heretofore unknown child. His stomach pitched but he managed a careless shrug. “Sure, boss.” He pointed where Manuel stood next to an unlocked forest-green crate stamped with a *Property of the United States Military* emblem on every available service. “Brought the merch.”

“So you did. Let’s take a look.” Indicating Casey should precede him, Pipe crossed the courtyard to the crate. Casey took in his surroundings, noting what had changed in four years, what hadn’t. The security was certainly more visible, brigadiers mapping the various property perimeters every fifty feet or so. In addition to manpower, Pipe’s technology had been upgraded; live-feed cameras blinked from under the eaves and drooping tree branches, and the men themselves wore in-ear comms, with radios clipped to their pockets.

That complicated things somewhat.

The courtyard on the north side of the hacienda had always been devoted to cartel operations, away from the prying eyes of visitors, and that, at least, hadn’t changed. To the left stood Pipe’s extensive stables, where more horses stuck their heads over the stalls’ half-doors than they had years ago. Casey remembered the stalls being used mostly for holding prisoners, especially Orras enemies, the pained cries of those tortured drifting over the pavers to hang heavy in the heated Colombian air. Not so anymore, and Casey commented, because too much silence would draw even more suspicion to him than he already earned. “Looks like you’ve expanded some,” he murmured, and gestured to the half-dozen animals staring sleepily out at the courtyard activity.

“My girls like horses. I keep them happy.”

Clearly, the subject was closed, and it took everything in Casey not to react. “And you built up the barracks.” A sprawling single-story outbuilding opposite the stables, the barracks had historically housed all of the Marin

cartel brigadiers at one point or another. It was where Casey had bunked down for several months, where he'd sneaked away from so often in his final weeks to buzz Ilda's downtown flat and spend hours testing the limits of her lithe curves. "Got a bunk in there for me?"

"Don't push your luck, Cortez." Pipe's voice was colder than he'd ever heard it, brooking no argument. "Only those I trust are allowed to stay at the hacienda, and as we established, I don't trust you. Start remembering that."

A tiny, tucked-away part of Casey respected Pipe for drawing that line in the sand, even as he resented him for it. He was keeping Casey from those who were *his*, not Pipe's—never Pipe's—but he understood. Keeping innocents safe was of the highest priority, and it was all too obvious that Pipe took their safety seriously.

*You forget everything you just saw inside.*

Yeah, sure. He would get riiiiiiight on that.

Casey came to a halt next to Pipe and stared down at the open crate and its contents. Forcibly slamming shut the lid on his emotions and tossing on a couple of padlocks for good measure, he remembered his job, his training, and got his shit together. Adam. Adam had to come first, if only because the threat to his brother was more immediate than the threat to Ilda and Arlo, as difficult as it was to admit. "These were the only pieces worth anything in the Marine caravan Josef hijacked. He told me to hide them until he got out, but I can't keep stuff this hot with me." Casey shook his head, slipping deeper into the role. "I'd just as soon dump it in the gulf."

"That would make you an idiot, son, and I know you're not an idiot." Pipe's voice was mild once more, considering. "I spoke to Seijas this morning."

Unsurprising, but Casey still internally held his breath. "I heard he was in solitary at La Modela. Not allowed calls."

"Those rules apply to other men's calls. Not mine." Pipe's trademark arrogance spread thick over each word. "Needless to say, he was livid when I told him you'd brought his take to my doorstep."

*Phew.* "Shit." So, Josef Seijas had played along, which meant that Tobias had also flouted the Rules That Apply To Other Men and alerted the undercover agent to the fact that Casey was, officially, calling in the favor Josef owed him from back in the day.



Pipe smiled, a touch of sympathy in his tone. “I would suggest you not return to Venezuela for a while, my friend. As soon as Seijas is released, he’ll be coming for you.”

Casey twitched as though nervous, shoving his agitated hands into his pockets. “So...are you saying you don’t want these?” He nodded jerkily at the crate, gaze flicking from Pipe to Manuel and back again, squinting slightly in the bright morning sunlight. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this shit, then?”

This shit being a pair of bio-targeting system rocket launchers developed by Faraday Industries. Desperate times, desperate measures, et cetera.

Shaking his head, Pipe crouched low and gripped the edge of the crate with one hand. “I didn’t say I didn’t want them. Seijas and I came to an understanding—I’ll pay him a percentage of what these would’ve gotten on the black market.” He shot Casey an amused look over the top of his shades. “Don’t ever say there’s no honor amongst thieves.” He ran a finger over the body of one of the launchers, leaving a smudge on Faraday Industries’ trademark matte-charcoal paint. “You know what these do, or am I going to have to make some inquiries?”

Casey made a show of reticence, mentally gritting his teeth at the shame of putting his family’s legacy in enemy hands for the first time in history. At least layered within that paint were their patented GPS tracking microdots. Retrieval would occur as soon as Casey and Adam were home again. “No, I know what they do.”

“And?”

“They’re DNA-seeking missiles. If you’ve got a blood sample from someone and want to take out everyone in their family tree, these things will launch rockets with a quarter-mile square destruction radius.” He feigned growing enthusiasm. Yes, he was ridiculously proud of all that Gillian had accomplished, but sometimes he worried for the technology her mind created. Her work turned violence into something akin to art, and that in itself was a threat to humankind. “You can shoot it from as far as five miles away, and the rocket will find the most dense grouping of same-DNA targets and take them out. The blast zone is clean, precise.”

“Hmm. I wonder what Seijas intended for these beauties. I certainly have a few ideas.” Abruptly, Pipe stood and gestured for Casey and Manuel to

follow him, leaving Jimenez to stand watch over the crate. “Come. There’s a...visitor I’d like you to meet.”

He couldn’t possibly be taking him to see—”We’re not going to the stables?”

“I have a daughter to protect. Things change.”

A daughter. Right.

They passed the barracks to enter a smaller attached outbuilding. Before, Pipe’s armory could barely be called such, but this selection of guns and other weaponry far outstripped any private collection Casey had seen, outside of his company’s. Pipe was stocked for a war, but against whom?

Unease trickled in, but Casey squashed it, maintaining an impassive expression as Pipe led him to a room the size of a walk-in closet. Light filtered in through a dirty window, illuminating a shackled man in the corner with his dark head bent in defeat. Limbs marred with blood, his lean bare chest covered in burns and cuts, nails missing from his limp fingers.

*Adam?* Fear and rage churned within him, and he scanned the room, counting brigadiers, estimating how many he could take and in what order, who was the easiest mark from whom to confiscate a firearm, and how long he had to get his battered brother from this hole in the wall into a vehicle before the shooting officially started.

Then Pipe snapped his fingers, and the prisoner’s head shot up, eyes dilated with terror.

*Not Adam.* But, dear God, what had been done to this poor bastard. Casey swallowed hard, not needing to playact his apprehension one bit.

“You remember Vicente, don’t you? Another of my former trusted brigadiers?” Pipe asked Casey, as though they both weren’t staring at a man whose mouth had been fucking *sewn* shut. Ugly black stitches bound Vicente’s lips together, the skin surrounding each stitch a nauseating purplish-red that indicated the onset of infection.

Pipe didn’t wait for Casey to respond, his tone utterly bland. “As it turns out, Vicente here has Orras blood in his veins—in fact, his dear *abuela* is *Ciro Orras’s* sister,” he said, naming the leader of the rival cartel. “Something we didn’t discover until recently, when the American Drug Enforcement Agency intercepted several shipments arriving into the Port of Los Angeles. Only those in my trusted circle knew about those shipments. Vicente was part of that circle.”

“And his...his mouth?” Casey eyed the stitches warily. This was a new side of Pipe, one that made him incredibly wary. In the past, Pipe had simply executed those who betrayed him, forgoing the crueler tortures for which other cartels were famous.

“I had a leak. I plugged it.”

Ilda. Ilda was the leak, not this unlucky sap who couldn't speak to defend himself. And who knew, maybe Vicente *had* snitched on Pipe's activities—no doubt, as a member of the Orras family, he'd spilled the beans more than once to keep the animosity alive and well between the two cartels. But DEA involvement meant Ilda; after all, it was through the DEA that he'd found Ilda again.

If the DEA made another move after Pipe had locked down Vicente's movements, Pipe would keep looking for the leak. It was only a matter of time until he narrowed down his search and realized it wasn't his inner circle but pillow talk that had undermined his power.

They exited the armory into bright late-morning sunshine, Pipe adjusting his shades as he scanned the courtyard. “What hotel are you staying in?” As if Pipe didn't already know.

Casey answered regardless. “La Estancia Maxima.”

“I suggest you stay there until I call for you. And I will be calling for you, Cortez.” Another snap of Pipe's fingers, and Manuel was pulling Casey's burner from the front pocket of his pants, programming in a number and sending a text, putting Casey's number on his own cell. “We'll be testing these weapons soon enough, I think. Wouldn't want you to miss the result of your gift, would we?”

“No, Pipe.” Casey snatched his phone from Manuel, stuffed it into his pocket and stalked toward the vehicle he'd driven up here.

He'd unlocked the door when Pipe's hard voice reached him again. “Oh, and Cortez?”

Casey turned, seeing his own stark face reflected in Pipe's mirrored sunglasses.

“Don't come back here without permission.”

It was a calculated risk to push against a direct order, but Pipe wouldn't buy quiet acquiescence, not based on the kind of employee Cortez had been four years ago and no matter the cowardice he'd purportedly embraced.

“Because?”

“Because I was obviously too lenient with you before, allowing you to go where you wished and *do* what you wanted. I won’t make that mistake again.” Pipe’s smile was feral. “I will not, Casímiro.”

Hopping into his rental, Casey avoided the stink eye Manuel sent his way and focused on navigating his way down the drive. Earlier, in the moments before they’d entered the barracks, he had noticed Pipe’s old driver, Franco, steering a big black SUV through the gates. If Franco wasn’t chauffeuring Pipe, then the man was guarding someone Pipe loved, and Casey had a decent guess who that might be.

*Ilda.* He needed to find Ilda.

Damn, Casey had to get three people out of the country now, not just one. No telling what Adam’s condition was anymore, given what Casey had just seen with Vicente, and he was hardly going to leave Ilda here when Pipe knew there was a snitch in his organization. And Arlo? No. Just...just fucking *no*.

But first he needed to shake the tail Pipe had so unsubtly set on him and get his ass to the second hotel room he had booked that morning, where he’d hid his IDs, his laptop, the rest of his Faraday shit. All that remained in the room where he’d reunited with his dead wife were a few changes of clothes and the papers identifying him as Cortez. Pipe’s boys had probably already gotten eyes on the hotel, searched the room, planted a bug or two.

The game was real now.

More real than he’d anticipated. In his mind’s eye, he kept replaying the moment Arlo turned and waved hello, round cheeks dimpling and silvery eyes full of perfect innocence.

His heart turned over in his chest as he stepped harder on the gas. How could Ilda keep this from him? How could she have screamed out her orgasm yesterday, wrung his come from him sobbing love words in his ear, and *not* found a single second to drop this particular bomb? A baby. A little girl. *His child.*

He scrubbed a hand over his chest, his white T-shirt catching on the calluses of his palm. It was a struggle to claw past the blinding anger and choking shock to try to see things from her perspective. Protection. That was something he understood, respected. But he’d never had anyone try to protect *his daughter* from *him*. It made him feel...irrational. Confused. Unhappy. And so fucking angry.

She ought to have told him. She ought to have *told him*, damn it.

He wanted to hold Arlo. A desperate and completely unfamiliar urge, but his arms ached with the need to lift her to his chest and be nose to nose with her gorgeous little face. He didn't know how heavy or light she was, nor how she smelled, nor what her giggle sounded like or if she was ticklish or if she suffered from nightmares. He didn't know any of it, and the lack of knowledge made him long for the heavy bag he regularly whaled on back at the Faraday compound's rec center.

More than ever, he needed to review the satellite footage Della had retrieved for him. It hadn't come in quick enough for him to watch before heading to the hacienda, but as soon as he was safely in his new room, where he could be himself and not the hated Cortez, nothing would keep him from learning what really happened in those fiery hours after their wedding.

With only his tumultuous thoughts for company, he navigated the Jeep to the hotel in Parque Periodista, always conscious of the Mercedes trailing his every turn from two car-lengths back. Soon enough, he parked along the street, locked the door and hauled ass to his original hotel room. He didn't bother peeking through the window, already knowing one of Pipe's brigadiers would have eyes on the place; instead, he turned on the crappy television set, tuned it to a daytime soap and began his sweep of the room.

Ten minutes later, he'd determined there were no microphones or cameras, but his belongings had definitely been sifted through. Thank goodness he'd transferred the rest of his stuff to the other room across the city, but that was less good luck and more good planning. Casey wasn't a fool, and he'd been in this world long enough to predict what would and wouldn't happen to a covert operative showing up someplace unexpected—like, say, back from the dead.

What *was* good luck? The slatted window in the bathroom shower was juuuuust wide enough for Casey to wiggle his shoulders through. Gripping the painted pipe that ran the entire rear of the hotel, backing onto an empty courtyard and situated right above the window, he levered his body through the opening. His entire weight suspended by his arms for the split second before he leapt onto a balcony a few yards away. From there, it was less than a story's drop to the courtyard pavers, and then he was jogging to the

far end of the courtyard, slipping out the gate and into a side street two blocks over from where the watchful Mercedes was parked.

Sweat beaded his hairline as he considered his next move. He needed to get to his second room, needed to see that footage and call Tobias and perform serious recon on the acres surrounding the hacienda and figure out how he planned to breach security to search for Adam. But stronger than that need was the imperative to seek out Ilda wherever she may be and demand the answers he sought. Or perhaps only one answer, to one question.

Why didn't she want Casey to know about Arlo?

His feet were moving before he realized he'd made up his mind, bringing him to the curb to hail a taxi. Casey could only imagine a few places where Ilda might be tempted to go, if it was truly Ilda in the back of Franco's SUV, and the first was Our Lady of the Bleeding Heart.

Casey had spent a relatively significant amount of time loitering in the rear pews, waiting for Ilda and Théa to do their church thing, practicing music for nontraditional services or meeting a group of women for some sort of committee. It was the most time Casey had ever spent in a Christian house of worship, and with each hour passed staring up at an ornate cross that meant nothing to him but so much to his lover, he'd feared what eventual result his lies would reap.

Successful spies didn't have entanglements on the job, but the truly brilliant among his kind were emotional succubi, feeding off the love and hate of their targets, the loyalties both forged and destroyed through blood and business, and *that* was how a spy gleaned the most valuable of intel. So by any metric, Casey ought to have been a fucking genius by the time his stint in Medellín ended, and to a certain extent, he had been. He'd gotten closer to Pipe for longer than any other American operative to date. The information he had been able to feed back to the CIA had resulted in some very severe strikes to the Marin cartel and the incarceration of several in Pipe's organization.

And yet. *And yet.*

It would hit him eventually, he reassured himself as he paid the driver and hopped the steps two at a time through the huge double doors into Our Lady. Eventually, he would fully comprehend the magnitude of fatherhood,

even if it was nothing more than a title at this point. That would change...as soon as he got his head around it.

As the double doors closed, cool dry air scented with a spice he'd never been able to identify cloaked his senses. He breathed deep, eyes closing momentarily as the rush of memories pummeled him. Yeah, he hated Colombia. Yeah, he hated the pain he'd carried around for the last four years, a burden unlike any he'd borne to date. But there was peace in this sanctuary, an oasis of quiet and calm in a sprawling, sunny sea of violence and poverty, and Casey let that peace infiltrate his tense body.

An echo filtered up the stairwell connecting the vestibule in which Casey stood, gasping in great gulps of stolen serenity, to the underground series of connected meeting rooms and Sunday School classrooms. His eyes opened slowly, lids surprisingly heavy, and he focused on the echo. Laughter—women laughing, and he knew with a hunter's instinct that Ilda was down there, laughing.

*How dare she.*

Once again, his feet moved before any conscious decision had been made, carrying him silently down the darkened stairwell into the basement. He clung to the shadows, following the sound of voices raised in chatter, gossip floating back and forth in conspiratorial Spanish. Turning a corner, he stopped on the threshold to a small kitchenette connected to a brightly lit common room filled to the brim with well-dressed women wearing glittering rings and fine cosmetics. The wives of Medellín's wealthy, gathered together in charity.

Like a gift from the heavens, proving that despite being saturated in strict Catholicism, God had a sense of humor, Ilda appeared between the common room and the kitchenette. Her back was to him as she called out something about using the *other* ice-blue crepe streamers, blindly seeking to set a dirty plate on the counter.

His breath caught.

She stiffened and turned, the plate settling with a clatter on the laminate countertop, eyes wide as she caught sight of him. He put a finger to his lips, then gestured for her to follow him, and she did.

A crook of his fingers and Ilda came, and it soothed jagged edges he hadn't been aware existed inside him. He curled his fingers around her slender wrist, her skin warm silk in his hold. His anger dipped further as he

dragged her to the stairwell, neither of them saying a word, gazes locked in a silence that went deeper than sound to apply acute pressure to their ribs, their delicate organs.

Her shoulders hit the wall, his hands bracketing either side of her head as he took in her plaited hair and purple dress, the hot skin that called to his tongue, her supple curves like magnets for his touch. Leaning in, he exhaled over her parted lips, trying to ignore the urge to press his forehead to hers as he used to do, before...before.

Just like that, his fury skyrocketed. “You have some explaining to do, wife.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## Chapter Eight

Being close to him was a particular kind of hell. Ilda loved his nearness, the heat rolling off him, the scents of soap and sweat that filled her nostrils and clouded her common sense. Her tongue knew he would taste of salt, just as her fingers knew he would feel like steel—firm, giving, breathing steel.

She hated that she craved him. His overwhelming physicality soothed even as it aroused, inspiring urges that had lain dormant for so long. Despite their tryst yesterday, she felt as though she were awakening in slow stages, as the truth of him—of them—finally sank in. Her heart pounded hard against her ribs as she stared into eyes that were *not* the color of her daughter's...but from whom Arlo had inherited her rare irises nonetheless.

He loomed over her in an obvious attempt to intimidate her into talking, but too bad for him, Ilda felt no fear, not in the slightest. Perhaps she'd never accurately expressed just how hot his big body got her. Hell, she *liked* that he outweighed her by one hundred pounds, stood a foot taller. It wasn't only that he made her feel small, feminine, protected. He had given her what she'd always secretly needed from a lover, and had only ever received from Casey: conquering.

A warrior. That was who she'd seen in him from the very first, and what had ultimately driven her to chase him. He wasn't handsome, not like Pipe, but so damn *male* as to compensate for any deficit his lack of a pretty face afforded him. His features were too blunt, too broad, cut like a rocky cliff and bearing evidence of more than one physical altercation. But he had those hazel eyes of gray and brown and blue, thick dark lashes and heavy, angled brows. A mouth surprisingly lush, but only when you kissed it.

So she bridged the gap between them, noses bumping, brushing, and sealed her lips to his. He moaned, tongue sweeping out to dip into her mouth, deep and wet. The back of her head hit the wall as he forced her chin to tilt upward, granting him better access, but he kept his body apart and his hands fixed above her. Still, she sensed the faint tremor that shook his limbs, and she reveled in it.

“You kiss so good, Cay-zee,” she whispered, making an effort to say his name correctly. It mattered in this moment to acknowledge who he truly was, and not who she’d believed—or maybe wished—him to be.

He tore his mouth away, breathing hard, and rested his forehead on hers. “Casí. To you, and only you, I am Casí, and that’s who I want to be.” Exhaling slowly, he lifted his head, expression stern and more authoritative than she’d ever before seen. “But never forget that I’m also Casey Faraday. That might not mean much to you in this moment, but it means a whole helluva lot to the rest of the world. Now, explain.”

Irritation at his arrogance surged. “There’s nothing to explain.”

“Oh? So you’re literally sleeping with the enemy, but you’re just gonna keep quiet, huh?” He boxed her in closer, his body vibrating as it covered hers. Visible shivers danced over his limbs, barely contained rage coupling with what she knew was incomprehension at her choice to leave him trembling. A big man with even bigger emotions was her Casí.

But her feelings could hold their own against him. “How dare you judge me? You’re telling me you were a monk these past four years?” His breath caught raggedly at her hissed accusation, and she was shocked by the shaft of sudden, painful jealousy spearing her ribs. Somehow, she forced herself to keep going, whisper turning ragged when she dropped her gaze to his throat. “Not that it’s any of your concern, but I... I haven’t been with him in months. Not since I learned he screwed some bimbo barfly.”

“Ilda—”

“*Shut. Up.*” God, she couldn’t handle his pity, would strangle it from him if he dared flip from anger to empathy in the space of a second.

His teeth clicked together in audible irritation. “Fine, then how about the fact that we have a daughter?”

Ilda’s jaw clamped shut. She wasn’t prepared to discuss Arlo with him, not with the instability currently rocking her world. Instability *he* had caused.

His wonderful mouth thinned. “You should’ve told me.”

So much for keeping quiet. “When should I have told you, hmm? You were dead.”

“I know. Ilda, *amor*, I know.” He heaved a frustrated breath, hanging his head momentarily before spearing her with a dark look. “But yesterday.

How could you not tell me about that beautiful girl who smiled at me this morning?” His voice broke, low and rough, and her heart did the same.

Still, she said nothing.

Her silence stoked his anger. “When did this happen? We always used protection.”

A question she’d asked herself numerous times over the years, and it always came back to her best guess. “Our wedding, I think.” Though she didn’t know for sure. “Arlo was born early.”

“Early?”

“Premature. She was only four pounds, six ounces.” Ilda’s stomach still clenched to remember her tiny little baby in neonatal care, trapped in an incubator and breathing through an oxygen hood. So small and fragile, it had been weeks before Arlo had been permitted to go home with Ilda. Long, heartbreaking weeks.

To look at Arlo now, you’d never know she was a preemie. She was a healthy average for weight and height in her age group, active and coordinated, with a quick mind and quicker smile.

“She’s deaf.”

“She’s *perfect*,” Ilda snapped, shoving at his chest to no avail. Protective rage was a flash flood inside her, ringing in her ears even as she kept her voice low, so as not to draw undue attention from the women of the Ladies Auxiliary. Her finger dug into his breastbone, poking aggressively. “She is clever and happy and healthy and *perfect*.”

“Shhh.” Casey rubbed her arms soothingly. “Shhh, baby, it wasn’t a criticism. I just want to know.” He swallowed audibly. “I want to know my daughter.”

“She’s not your daughter.” Ilda shoved at his hands and he stepped back, dropping his hold. “Not in any way that matters.”

“Biology matters.”

“Pipe is all she’s known. He’s been there, supporting us before she came into the world, and he’s the only father she has ever had.” She took a deep breath. “Or will have. He’s officially adopting Arlo following the wedding.”

Casey did *not* like hearing that. Her eyes widened as he stalked forward again to cage her between corded forearms. Unwelcome desire licked at her senses, warming her belly and making her thighs clench. “Hate to break it

to you, Señora Faraday, but you can't marry when you've already got a husband."

"Our marriage is null and void." She hated the breathless quality of her voice. "Since you weren't *you*."

"Wanna bet?" he growled, leaning in until he filled her vision. "That was my signature on the certificate."

"But not your name in the ceremony."

"Is it the words that make it legal, or the document? Check the certificate, Ilda."

"I can't." The words were ripped from her. "The chapel fire. I...it was lost."

He grunted, but she couldn't interpret the sound. "Do you know that for sure?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "I didn't lie on the certificate. I *didn't*."

"Why not?" And yes, that was her bitter tone. "You lied about everything else."

"But not this. Damn it, Ilda." This time, it was Casey who kissed her, every angry word he refused to say because he so obviously didn't want to hurt her stamped into the brand of his lips.

She fought to remain still, to not respond to the storm of emotion she could sense swirling within him, but it was impossible. He vibrated with life, and she didn't have it in her to deny the potent pull of the life force that was Casey Faraday. Whimpering, she parted her lips to permit him entry, hands lifting to hover over the brawny biceps revealed by the short sleeves of his plain white tee.

Abruptly, Casey ceased all movement, hissing out a breath, and Ilda opened her lust-heavy lids just in time to catch the glint of a deadly blade against his throat. Just as she tensed to scream, a familiar male voice broke through their heavy exhalations.

"I'm going to need you to step away from the lady, hombre."

Relief shuddered through her. "Axel, no, it's—"

"Axel?" As though the knife had never posed any real threat, Casey pinched his assailant's hand at the base of the thumb, forcing the weapon to drop from suddenly numb fingers. After a brief struggle, he turned, using his body to shield her, and confronted the man who'd snuck up on them both. "Axel Moreno, what the ever-loving fuck."

To Ilda's shock, Casey grappled the DEA agent in a priest's collar into a vigorous bear hug, whispered English spilling from their lips as the two men beamed at one another. Her own grasp of the language was fair-to-middling at best, but she caught enough to understand that not only did they recognize one another, but they were friends. Intimate friends.

Didn't that just figure. Her handler and her husband, brothers-in-arms.

Casey was the first to pick up on her displeasure, coughing into his fist before switching politely into Spanish for her benefit. He propped one hand on the wall beside her head, effectively staking her as his territory, and she seethed at what sort of picture they presented to Axel. Well, she mostly seethed. There may or may not have been a small percentage of her that rather enjoyed his overt alpha-dog behavior.

"Can't believe you're Ilda's handler, man. Small world."

Axel grinned, white teeth gleaming in the shadows. In his thirties, he possessed a boyish handsomeness, with curly sun-streaked brown hair, a high forehead and cheeks that creased at the slightest hint of a smile. He was leaner than Casey, and stood an inch or so taller, but in the two years they'd worked together, Ilda had never once been tempted by the face and body that no doubt drew women like bees to honey. "And you're her...something?"

"Yeah, let's stick to 'something' for now." Casey's answering smile remained wry. "When did you leave L.A.?"

"I split my stints for a few years, but recently it's been all Colombia, all the time. Cartel activity's been pretty high as of late. We're trying to crack down." Axel shook his head as he crossed his arms over his chest, black button shirt and jacket pulling taut over toned muscles. "Even went so far as to form a joint task force with Interpol, since there's been increased trafficking in European markets."

A frown furrowed Casey's forehead. "Let me guess—specifically in Russia and mob-controlled territories."

"How'd you know?"

"Long story, but I promise, next time you're stateside, I'll buy you a drink and fill you in." Shifting his attention to Ilda, Casey nodded toward Axel. "He dated my sister a while back. For a time there, we even thought he'd make it official and join the family."

Axel's smile held a wistful tinge. "Hey, I tried. Gillian wasn't having any of it."

Casey squeezed the DEA agent's shoulder in sympathy. "She's married to her work, first and foremost." His frown deepened. "Come to think of it, she didn't make it home for the holidays last year."

At that, Ilda lost her patience. "I didn't know you had a sister."

Thankfully, Casey had the presence of mind to appear mildly sheepish. "Two, as a matter of fact, and two brothers. All younger."

The oldest of five. Well, that might explain the mile-wide protective streak constantly blocking her path. "I see."

Axel glanced between the two of them, accurately reading into the subtext of the moment and doing all of them a favor by changing the subject. "When Tobias contacted me about setting up a meet for you with my CI, he didn't mention what for. I'd like to know, please." When Casey hesitated, Axel's expression tightened. "You wouldn't have let me within ten feet of Gillian if you hadn't had me thoroughly vetted." He flicked a finger toward the white cleric's collar. "Plus, as you can see, I'm a man of God now, and if you can't trust a priest..."

Casey's voice was barely audible when he spoke, unaware that his soft, serious words shook the foundation of Ilda's concept of safety. "Adam was kidnapped on Friday night in Boston. We got camera footage of his assailants, all of whom have direct ties to the Marin cartel." He glanced at her. "Manuel Dias led the attack, and we all know he doesn't make a move unless it's at the direct order of Pipe."

As Ilda reeled, Axel frowned. "I'm assuming they asked for ransom, your family being who they are."

*What does that mean? Why would Casey's family have anything to do with asking for ransom money?*

"No ransom demand. This shit is so fucking convoluted, we're scabbling back home to make sense of it." Casey scrubbed a hand over his face, but never shifted his position from her side. "All we know is they took Adam, and they don't seem in any hurry to give him back. If they intended to kill him, it would be to send a message, and as far as I'm aware, his body hasn't turned up on my mother's doorstep yet." Hard, harsh words, said with so little inflection, but Ilda knew it must have cost him to speak with such cool rationale.

Axel obviously sensed the same. He gripped Casey's shoulder in a show of support. "How do I help? How do my people help?"

But Casey shook his head. "We've got to keep this quiet for now. If the press catches wind, any chance we have of extracting Adam without incident is lost."

"Why would the press care?" Hostages were taken in South America all the time, individuals in the wrong place at the wrong time on a continent stricken with every manner of social disease. Ilda couldn't recall the last time the mainstream media had bothered to report on it.

Both men stared at her as though she'd spoken gibberish, but Casey's expression once more turned vaguely uncomfortable. "I am... I...my family is the single largest arms manufacturer in the world. We supply the US government and the myriad American military branches with their weapons, ground vehicles, aircraft and body armor."

Ilda could do nothing but blink up at him. Not just a spy, but a bloody warmonger. Quick calculations told her that if his *family* was truly as he said, his worth—and his kidnapped brother's worth—was in the range of billions.

She crossed herself.

Casey scowled. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" she croaked, leaning more of her weight against the wall, clammy palms pressed to her thighs.

But he didn't answer. The muscles in his carved jawline bunched as he switched his focus to Axel. "I hate saying this, but we have a more immediate threat than the status of Adam's well-being, and I'm glad I don't have to track you down." His hand left the wall to settle on her waist, and though she tensed, she didn't push him off. "Pipe knows he has a leak."

Axel lost any hint of humor. "Explain."

"I've just come from a tour of Pipe's prison block. He's got a former brigadier by the name of Vicente shackled up and tortured to within an inch of his life for purportedly snitching and causing the DEA to crack down on shipments going into the Port of Los Angeles. Any of that sound familiar to you?"

Ilda felt the blood drain from her face as Axel swore.

Casey squeezed her hip in reassurance. "You know how this works, Moreno. The moment the DEA makes another move on Marin cartel cross-

border activity, and so long as Vicente is locked up and...not speaking, Pipe's gonna know he didn't plug his leak. That means he keeps looking. Eventually, he'll look in the right direction." His fingers flexed against her. "Stop using Ilda."

Massaging the back of his neck, Axel glanced from her to Casey. "The intel...she does good work for us. We've learned more about Pipe's movements in the past two years than we have since you were under with the cartel."

The hits simply wouldn't quit coming. Logically, she knew Casey must have reported to his agency on what he'd seen and done four years ago, but each reminder was a slap in the face, proving once again that she hadn't known a damn thing about him aside from what he made her feel in bed. "I don't want to stop helping Axel."

Casey's glare was a fierce thing. "Why the hell are you doing this, Ilda? Do you have any idea of the risk you're taking as an informant?"

She refused to let him frown her into obeisance. "I already told you. It's the right thing to do."

"That can't be it. No one's that altruistic, baby, not even you."

"Who said anything about altruism?" Now she did shove at his hand, no longer liking his proprietary manner. "Two years ago, I was tucking Arlo into bed and realized it was the anniversary of Théa's death. My daughter will never know her aunt. My sister will never hold her niece. The two most important people in my life will never meet because some *matón* with a gun wanted to prove a bloody point against Pipe." Her whisper shook in her throat. "He is to blame. The cartels are to blame. This culture of sick corruption is to blame. I will not sit idly by and raise my daughter in a war zone. I need to do my part to bring an end to the violence."

"That violence will never end," Casey said quietly. "To pretend otherwise does you a disservice, *fénix*."

Her hands turned to fists at her sides. "What did I say about that word, *marido*?"

Brows sky high, Axel cut in just as Casey opened his mouth to argue. "Tell you what, we'll cool it on our meets for a while, and I won't have the task force move on any intel Ilda alone has provided us. Anything we've had corroborated by other sources, though, is fair game. Sound like a plan?"



Casey nodded, grudgingly, and Ilda followed suit. It made sense, even if she didn't like having her decisions undermined by men to whom she owed nothing. Her choices were her own, and when Axel had initially approached her with the intent to turn, she'd acquiesced not because he was such a slick operator, but because she knew this was her chance to give Théa's death some meaning.

Her choice, her risk. She could not survive in a vacuum of inaction and ignorance. While Arlo's safety would always, *always* come first, from now until Ilda's final breath, she couldn't count herself as any kind of mother if she didn't fight to make the world a better place for her daughter, even if that meant subversively working against the only father figure Arlo had ever known. "You will let me know when it's safe to meet?" she asked Axel, ignoring Casey's forbidding stare.

"I will, but hide the mobile I gave you for now. Turn it off, remove the battery, put it in a waterproof bag and bury it in the garden. Dig it up in a month and check for messages." Axel reached out to grasp her hand, lifting her knuckles gallantly to his lips, and while she was unwillingly amused by his obvious flirtation, she remained unmoved. "Take care, *amiga*. And Casey?" He released her hand, grasped Casey's for a hearty shake. "Anything you need to get Adam safely home, I'm your guy." Mounting the stairs, he paused. "Oh, and say hi to Gillian for me, next time you talk."

Ilda watched as Casey's throat bobbed in a swallow. "When are you coming home for real, buddy?"

Axel's chuckle was devoid of humor. "When the violence is over. So...never." With a quick wave, he hustled up the steps to disappear into the vestibule above, leaving Ilda and Casey standing in tense silence.

Which Casey promptly smashed in the most high-handed manner possible. "Don't worry about digging up that burner a month from now. You and Arlo are coming home with me."

Just like that, all of Ilda's earlier anger rushed to the forefront. Shoving at his upper body with both hands, she propelled herself away from him until her shoulders hit the opposite wall of the narrow hallway. "No," she hissed. "No, you don't get to decide what I do, and you most certainly don't get to decide what my daughter does. *Do not* argue with me," she snapped under her breath when Casey started to interject. "You have no claim to us, not unless we decide to give you a claim. Our home is here. Our *life* is here."

“With a drug lord?” he spat, incredulous.

“At least Pipe has never pretended to be someone he’s not.”

Casey’s jaw firmed. “Neither did I, not when it counted. And I can prove it.”

Without warning, her heart leapt into her throat. Something in his tone, the certainty, the unyielding confidence, warned her to tread carefully. She would be wise to remember that this man was a trained spy who’d once successfully infiltrated the most powerful cartel in Colombia to work his way up the ranks of Pipe’s brigadiers and gain the boss’s trust and respect. “How?”

“I’m going to find a copy of that marriage certificate.” His eyes implored her, mirroring the gruff demand in his voice. “I lied about a lot of stuff, Ilda, but the name I wanted to give you was mine. Really, actually mine—I need you to believe me.”

A knot formed in her chest. “God, it’s all about you, isn’t it? How *you* feel, what *you* need. Your wife, your daughter, your lies, your mission.” Disappointment, foreign and unpleasant, settled in the pit of her stomach; she hadn’t known Casey was capable of disappointing her any more than he already had. “The depth of your selfishness appalls me, Señor Faraday.”

“Ilda—”

“Here’s your first lesson in parenthood, Cay-zee.” She pointed to the stairs as she backed down the hallway toward the committee meeting still going strong only a few meters away. “Your needs come second to whatever is in the best interest of your child. Always.” Flattening a hand over her midsection, she blinked away unexpected tears stinging her eyes. “When you’ve figured that out, *then* we’ll talk.”

# *Chapter Nine*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *Four Years Earlier*

The thirteen gold *arras matrimoniales* jangled in his new wife's pocket as Casey Faraday fisted the skirt of her white cotton sundress in both hands. His head still reeled from the shock of what he'd done, but his body—no, his *heart*—knew how right he was to sign next to his girl's name on the certificate the priest had set before them less than ten minutes earlier.

Married. Holy shit, he was married.

Bending down, Casey dragged his parted lips over her jaw, breathing in the faint scent of gardenias that clung to her wild tawny curls. "You said 'I do,'" he murmured in Spanish as his fingertips brushed her bare thighs. "Can't believe you said yes to me, *fénix*." His phoenix, who in the short time he'd known her had proven her ability to rise from the ashes and begin anew. She awed him, this woman.

"How could I say no, *marido*?" *Husband*. He felt her smile as she tipped her head back to give him better access. "You make me feel..."

"What do I make you feel?" His tongue flicked out to taste the pulse pounding in her throat as his hands spread to curve over her thighs. Soft and warm, taut with lithe muscle. God, he loved her thighs. He loved them so much, he needed them wrapped around his waist *right now*. "C'mon, baby," he coaxed, tightening his grip. "Tell me how you feel."

"So bad, Casí." Her wriggling body trapped between him and the sacristy wall, she tugged at the collar of his black button-down, keeping his lips on the sweet spot beneath her ear. "So *hot*."

"I do that to you," he growled as he licked a path along her jawline to claim her plush lips in a searing kiss. "I get you hot, make you bad." More jingling as her skirt bunched at her waist, and he lifted his head to stare down at his beautiful wife, heart swelling as the seconds sped by. "You're gonna let me fuck you in a church, when the priest could walk in any second?" Casey tugged aside the gusset of her panties, stroked her slick folds from back to front before playfully tweaking her clit. "You dirty girl."

Ilda's dimples flashed in cheeks flushed bright with hectic desire, dark eyes gleaming in the faint glow of the flickering pillar candle. "But I'm your dirty girl, Casí."

Fuckin' right, she was. The pads of his fingers shaped the hard nub of her clitoris, enjoying how each small stroke aroused more and more wetness,

calling to his throbbing dick until he couldn't wait a single second longer. "Turn around," he ordered as he reached into his pants pocket and produced a condom, managing to unbutton, unzip and unwrap one-handed—with a little help from his teeth to tear the foil—because he couldn't bear to stop touching her, his other hand still bunched in the skirt of her sundress, thumb brushing against the warm skin of her toned belly.

She turned for him, of course, because his girl was so damn good at following direction when it came to loving, her slender hands splayed on the sacristy wall, her body arched to thrust her round ass directly into his groin. Too bad her underwear was impeding the view. "Roll those hips for me, baby." He blew a harsh breath through gritted teeth. "Nice and slow, like you do when we dance."

Her hips rolled. The coins clinked.

Casey thought he might legitimately die, right there in the room where the priests prepped for Sunday mass every week. Reluctantly releasing her after making sure her skirts stayed high up around her waist, he grabbed the sides of her panties in both hands and pulled them down over her writhing backside, lowering to kneel behind her as he helped her step out of the damp lace. White lace, because it was her wedding night.

His erection practically leapt toward her, but he maintained control, just barely, by sinking his teeth into the back of her thigh, licking the hot skin when her movements stuttered, stalled. Then he was standing again, her naked ass in his unyielding grasp as he kneaded, squeezed, spread. She had so much shape to her, his *fénix*, tight and compact and healthily curved, and it surprised him not at all that he hadn't been able to keep his hands off her from the moment they met.

He was a dog that way. But, God, only with her from now on. If she wanted him leashed, he'd put the collar on himself. *Call me to heel, baby. I won't leave your side.*

Flicking open the buttons of his dress shirt and adjusting the weight of his package to sit outside his fly, his balls heavy with need, he gripped his cock in one hand and ran the blunt, sheathed head up and down her slick lips, dipping into her opening in a cruel game of Just The Tip until she pounded one fist against the wall, mewling in frustration.

He laughed, amusement and pain knotting together because he understood exactly what that angry little fist meant. "I'm feeling like you're

mine, baby, so I'm gonna take you like I own you, and you won't stop me, will you?" Except he would absolutely stop if she asked, and she knew that, had seen him prove as much to her during their short courtship. Nothing and no one would hurt his wife, especially not him.

"Never stop you," Ilda whispered, big dark eyes gleaming at him as she looked back over her shoulder. "Love you."

Shivers raced down his spine. "Fuck, baby, I love you, too." He thrust into her in one swift, sure glide.

She whimpered, writhing, her pussy squeezing him so good and tight it was a wonder he didn't spontaneously come. With a heartfelt grunt, he gripped her hips, lifting her onto her tiptoes to get a better angle for his next thrust. Wet, hot, so fucking hot, and every inch of him that entered her was held so greedily by her inner muscles that he had the hazy thought that nothing in the world—nothing nothing nothing—was more important than this. Nothing was more important than being buried deep inside the love of his goddamn life.

One hand left her hip to stroke up her torso, fingers covering a breast over the thin fabric of her dress before dipping inside to cup her soft flesh. The hard point of her nipple abraded his palm, and he squeezed, probably harder than he should. But his *fénix* didn't protest, merely moaned, and God, that was a beautiful sound, so he squeezed her again, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her nipple, enjoying how she arched into his touch like she needed it, couldn't breathe without it.

He couldn't breathe without it, without having his hands on her, branding her with his skin, his scent, his personal stamp of ownership. When his touch no longer sufficed, and the pace of his thrusts into her exquisite cunt increased, he bent his head to lick along the curve of her neck, the smooth line connecting her strong shoulders to the lithe length of her throat. She tasted of sweat, salt, fresh air and citrus, tart on his tongue and making him ache to bite her like the beast he was.

His teeth sank into the sensitive tendon connecting neck to shoulder, and he listened with raw satisfaction to her cry out and grow even wetter around his cock. He growled against her skin, fucking into her harder than before. "You like it when I bite you." But he already knew that, had given her the edge of his teeth before when he'd fucked her on all fours in the backseat of an SUV.

Her cheek pressed against the wall, hair wild and sweat-dampened at her temples, and though her long lashes sensually shaded her dark eyes, she managed to meet his gaze. “I want my hands on you, Casí.”

He wouldn't last if she did, but he understood the urge, hating that there was any distance at all between them, any oxygen. Bending closer, his bigger body arched over hers, his bare chest pressed tight to her spine. Lifting her hand from the wall, he brought two of her fingers to his mouth and sucked them between his lips. His tongue laved the digits, getting them wet and nipping the tips with his teeth.

She shivered beneath him.

After seating himself deep inside her and holding there, holding and not moving and *fuck*, that was difficult when all he wanted to do was move, move, move and then come in a blinding rush, he gave her one last little lick. Pulling her fingers from his mouth, he guided her hand down, down, until her fingertips brushed over her clit, and her eyes finally closed, her lips parted and dragging against the wall. “Casí.”

His fingers over top of hers, he forced her to pet herself, stroke herself, get herself off. “We're gonna make you come, aren't we? You and me together, baby, we're gonna make you come so good and hard.” Catching her earlobe between his teeth, he rolled his hips, withdrawing before pumping in again, and that, combined with their tangled fingers and his dirty urgings, pushed her over the edge into ecstasy.

Her orgasm rippled through her, then him, and his hips sped, slapping into her lush backside until he couldn't hold off any longer. He came on a groan, wrapping both arms around her to lock her small body against his.

Nuzzling his face into her throat, he breathed in her scent, smiling when he heard her giggle through her heaving exhalations. “What's so funny?”

“We're going to hell.”

“Because we did it in a church?” His lips brushed her cheek in a soft kiss as he slowly, achingly withdrew from her tight clutch. He hated letting go of her, but the alarm clock at the base of his skull told him he didn't have time to waste. It didn't take much to right his clothing once he'd knotted off the condom, tossing it in a waste bin tucked into a corner of the tiny sacristy.

Turning to face him, Ilda sighed, as she always did when he teased her about her devotion to her faith, but he hoped she knew he didn't belittle it.

He simply enjoyed the intimacy of being able to tease her about something he knew she cared about, and witnessing her affectionate frustration in reaction. While she tugged the top of her dress back into place and smoothed her skirt over her naked bottom, he stooped to snag her discarded panties, dangling them in front of her face before snatching them out of reach and stuffing them into his pocket.

Panic flitted across her gorgeous face. “I can’t sit in the chapel without any undergarments!” She made a valiant attempt to reach for his pocket, but he gently pushed her fretful hands away. “Casí, I *can’t*.”

“Sure you can. It’ll give you something to pray about while I’m gone.” His smile faded at the thought of leaving her, but there was nothing to be done about it. A fact made readily apparent when the phone in his pocket buzzed twice, indicating an incoming text, and his euphoric high disappeared as reality came crashing down. He didn’t bother checking the phone, choosing instead to cup her cheek in one hand. “I have to go, baby, but only for a couple of hours.” Then he’d be back for her, as promised, and their lives together could finally begin.

Shifting, she dropped a kiss into his palm, her hand lifting to link around his wrist, but she didn’t try to pull him away. No, she kept him in place, leaning into his touch like a purring kitten, and it made him want to pet her, for hours. Another kiss, and then she murmured, so soft he barely heard her, “Remember that you promised me all of your secrets, Casí.”

“Every last one will be yours,” he vowed, shoving away the guilt. She’d married him with only half-truths and fervent promises that he would tell her all, in time, and the risk she had taken floored him. “After I finish my business here, we’ll take our honeymoon. The world is your oyster, *fénix*. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. But only with you, *marido*.”

He fucking loved it when she called him her husband, her tone all proprietary and full of promise. He was going to enjoy this new collar and leash of his. He was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

Leading her out of the sacristy and into the chapel, her hand tucked securely in his, he stopped near the last row of pews, where they had stowed her luggage—a single bag, far smaller than he’d expected her to pack, and his heart clenched to think of how much she was sacrificing, all to be with him. Unable to help himself, he sank both hands into her mass of curls and



yanked her roughly against him, dragging his lips over hers and dipping his tongue inside for one last taste. Sweet, so sweet, and his.

She kissed him with earnest longing already evident in the curve of her mouth. She *missed* him, and he wasn't even gone yet. *Lost my fucking soul to her, don't ever want it back.* Brows drawn, he stole another greedy kiss, breathing ragged when he straightened. "Only a couple of hours," he promised hoarsely. "The sun will barely be up before I'm here again."

Her throat moved in a visible swallow and she nodded, but said nothing.

Taking his hands off her body was a torture worse than any he'd previously been subjected to, but he did it. Somehow, he stopped touching her, backing silently away until he stood at the heavy wooden door separating the chapel from the outside world, his gaze never leaving her face.

She lifted her hand in a shy wave, and it did something awful and amazing to his heart. He cleared his throat, trying to speak and failing. So he simply kissed his fingertips for her, gathering her quick smile into his aching chest before he pushed out into the dark, warm night.

Drawing his phone and key ring from his pocket, he unlocked the Land Rover that had carried him into the forest not even an hour earlier, climbing into the driver's seat as he dashed off a quick text to alert his tactical team that they were T-minus thirty minutes from their first aggressive move against the target. The engine rumbled to life, and Casey threw the vehicle into Reverse before speeding away from the secluded chapel.

Tamping down thoughts of her was a Herculean task, but he'd been in this line of work long enough—too long, damn it—to know he couldn't complete his mission if he remained distracted by his plans for the future, for *them*. God, he had so many plans for their life together, and every last one of those plans filled him with hope.

Perhaps it was because of his determination to focus only on the coming hours of dangerous work ahead of him and his team—the hours that separated him from his new future, with her—that he ignored the tremor beneath his tires, putting it down to one of the small quakes the region was known for. He simply pressed harder on the gas, not bothering to glance in the rearview mirror.

He didn't see the smoke rising a mile back down the winding road.

He didn't see the orange glow of a fatal fire, hell on earth.

He didn't see a goddamn thing.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Ten

Being kidnapped sucked.

First of all, he was sleeping on a dirt floor, hard-packed and exceedingly uncomfortable. Second, the lone blanket they'd given him itched like a mofo and had probably given him fleas. Third—and worst by far—the toilet was, for reals, a bucket. Like, a *bucket* bucket over there in the corner of this ratchet prison cell they'd shoved him in.

Adam could've dealt with all the rest of it, probably, but The Bucket crossed a line. Cruel and unusual punishment—and they wouldn't let him have any hand sanitizer, either.

He shifted in his corner—the farthest from The Bucket, of course—shoving his shoulders deeper into the vee made where the timeworn wooden walls met. They had left him a battery-operated plastic lantern to light the forlorn space, and if he'd been Gillian, Adam would have already disassembled it and MacGyver'd some crazy-ass explosive, set it off in his captors' faces, stolen the keys to his cuffs and escaped.

Escaped into what was the question. It smelled...hot. Humid. Slightly floral and earthy, but all that was overlaid by the scent of barn animals. His jailers spoke Spanish, but Adam wasn't all that great with specific dialects; he guessed he was in South America, but it could just as easily have been lower Central. So even if he somehow managed to get free, it was entirely possible he'd be shot for his efforts or bitten by some stupid-ass venomous reptile in whatever country this was.

And to think, he'd been jonesing for a vacation somewhere balmy. *When it rained...*

He sighed, tipping his head back to stare at the exposed rafters, dusty, cobwebbed and slowly rotting. His legs were bent, feet flat on the floor and forearms draped tiredly over his knees. They'd shot him up with something in the van, something that left his skin feeling too tight and too warm where it clung to muscle and sinew. He had lost consciousness shortly thereafter, with little clue how much time had passed while he was zonked. A day,

maybe longer. He'd woken up here, already chained, his mouth dry as fucking sawdust, and since then two full days had passed.

No one had bothered to ask him any questions, or take his picture, or tell him anything at all. And Adam, scrabbling to remember everything he'd been taught about hostage situations, had only spoken to inquire after the basics.

*Can I have some water?*

Water had been provided.

*I'm wicked hungry. What's for dinner?*

Beef jerky and a mango, apparently. Every damn time.

*Where do I piss?*

A finger pointing at The Bucket.

He hadn't asked why he was taken. He hadn't tried to negotiate or bribe. For nearly three days, he'd simply monitored the comings and goings of the various guards outside his cell, waiting for someone to do something, anything. But nothing ever happened.

Until now.

The sound of approaching footsteps, several pairs, echoed in the corridor outside his cell, vague murmurs too low for Adam's ears breaking the anxious quiet that had descended. A shadow passed over the barred door, the scratch of a key in a padlock, and Adam decided he could at least show a modicum of interest at whatever was about to happen.

He lifted his head.

It took a moment for him to place the man who entered. In his mid-forties, his suit neatly pressed and his coiffed black hair gone gray at the temples, Pipe Marin was attractive in a silver fox sort of way. He kept his hands loosely in his trouser pockets, and was followed into the cell by the greasy jackass who'd abducted Adam in the first place. "Mr. Faraday," Pipe said mildly, his English only lightly accented. Adam remembered reading somewhere that Pipe had attended the London School of Economics, back when his investments still carried the sweet scent of legitimacy. "You look a tad ragged around the edges."

And now Adam knew where he was. Colombia. Freaking Colombia. "I smell like shit." He kept his voice bland. "Literally. Like shit."

"Yes, I'm certain this isn't at all what you're used to, in terms of travel accommodations. No high-thread-count bed linens, no savory continental

breakfasts...”

“No modern plumbing.”

Pipe chuckled, tilting his head in curious consideration. “You haven’t asked who I am.”

“I know who you are.”

“Nor have you asked why you’re here.”

“Does it really matter?” When Pipe said nothing, Adam raised a wry brow. “I’m here because you decided I should be here. Simple as that.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you.” Shifting closer, hands still in his pockets, Pipe smiled at him, small and cold. “Perhaps I ought to tell you what I do to mouths that talk too much.”

“If you’re asking for a blow job, sorry, but you’re not my type.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Adam smirked, wondering when his good sense was going to kick in and shut him up. “Too old.”

That seemed to startle Pipe into something resembling real laughter, and he shook his head. “I should’ve come to visit you earlier, Mr. Faraday. I had no idea you were so entertaining.”

Adam slid his hands down his thighs, not wanting to reveal the slight, shaking tension that had taken hold. “So. Would it make you feel better if I asked what the hell is going on?”

“That *is* why I’m here—to explain the situation to you.”

“Ah. So it’s a ‘situation,’ then.” His hands fisted in his lap, gaze flicking briefly to the other man hovering at Pipe’s shoulder. “What’s his deal?”

“Manuel?” Pipe rolled his shoulders and waved a negligent hand. “Never you mind. I hope he wasn’t too rough with you on the way here.”

Adam decided that no answer here was the best answer. Though, really, it was a shame to let such a perfect opportunity for sarcasm slide.

“The situation is...complicated.” Pipe shrugged in a quintessentially European manner, moving toward the lantern on the floor. Manuel stuck with him like a shadow. “Believe it or not, I don’t make a habit of kidnapping young men off the streets. You were, shall we say, a favor.”

A favor. Kidnapped as a *favor*.

What. The. Hell. “Y’know, the favors I typically do for friends involve providing a jump for a dead car battery or dropping someone off at the airport. Maybe covering the bar tab.”

“How generous of you.”

“I try.”

“Hmm. Well, I am sad to say that my favor-doing days are over.”

Kneeling, Pipe toyed with the lantern, adjusting the brightness until the cell was practically bursting with too-white light. Adam squinted against the glare. “It appears that the...friend... I collected you for has neglected to uphold his side of the bargain, which means that I am now in possession of the heir to a fortune, an heir whom, frankly, I have no wish to keep.”

“Aww, c’mon, Pipe. You don’t want me? I’m hurt.”

“What can I say—you’re not my type, either.”

A shaft of light speared Adam directly in his eyes as Pipe shifted, and Adam ducked his head. He’d been sitting in the dark too long, apparently, because *fuck*, that shit sizzled on his retinas. “Don’t suppose you’d be willing to let me just walk out of here. Bygones, et cetera.”

But Pipe didn’t answer. In fact, Pipe wasn’t moving at all, his hand clasped around the lantern as his dark gaze fixed unblinkingly on Adam. “Lift your head, Mr. Faraday.”

A chill crawled over Adam’s nape. Slowly, he raised his face to the light, blinking as he tried desperately to keep his eyes from burning. His jaw clamped shut as Pipe abruptly rose and came toe-to-toe with Adam, looming over him. He wasn’t an especially big man, but what he lacked in stature, Pipe made up for in presence. And right now, that presence was trying to beat Adam into submission. “Like what you see, old man?” he managed hoarsely, trying to keep the trembling from spreading up his arms and into his torso.

Crouching next to him, Pipe grabbed Adam’s chin in a steely grip, and for the first time, Adam felt real fear. Real, nauseating, sweat-inducing fear. What *did* Pipe do to those mouths he didn’t like? What did he do to young men he snatched from American alleyways as a *favor*?

What did he plan to do to Adam?

Swallowing convulsively, Adam managed to hold Pipe’s stare, studying the minute changes in the drug lord’s expression as the silent seconds ticked by. “Well?” he prompted, then immediately wanted to kick himself. *Shut the fuck up, man!* Jesus.

“No, Mr. Faraday,” Pipe finally said, tone flat. “I can’t say as I like what I see.” Releasing his hold on Adam, he rose smoothly to his feet. He handed

the lantern to Manuel without looking, his eyes never leaving Adam's, and for some reason, Adam found that more chilling than anything else the man had yet done. "Do you have any siblings, Mr. Faraday?" He didn't wait for Adam to answer. "Of course you do. You're the youngest of five, I believe. Two older sisters, two older brothers."

Adam tensed. Threats to him were one thing; threats to his family another matter entirely.

"Did you know that I once sent Gillian a car?" Pipe's voice had become conversational, but there remained something eerily dead buried deep in the smooth consonants and rolling vowels. "I'd heard she collected them, and thought it was worth a shot. She didn't give me a thing, of course...but she did keep the car." Again, Pipe rolled his shoulders, but this time it was the action of a boxer before a fight, a loosening of tense muscles.

Adam braced himself. A split second later, the blow crashed into his cheekbone, the bruising immediate and aching around his eye. His head smacked hard against the wall, but he managed to remain upright, his palms flattening on the wood. The itchy, stretched feeling returned to hover just beneath his skin as he shook through the ringing in his ears.

Slowly, painfully, he looked up at Pipe, who was no longer quite so self-contained. The man's chest heaved as though he'd run a marathon, angry color darkening his face. "I understand that you likely won't believe me, Mr. Faraday, but I never hit people. I have men to do that for me."

"Huh. Maybe I *am* your type, then." Pipe's fist caught Adam along the jaw this time, and his teeth clacked shut, blood welling from where he bit his tongue. He spat red onto the dirt floor before glaring up at Pipe once more. "A polite 'no' would've sufficed, pal."

"I am not your pal, Adam Faraday." Shaking out his fist, Pipe moved to the door. Manuel followed after setting the lantern on the floor. On the threshold, Pipe paused. "But have no doubt—I'll be visiting you again before your stay here is over."

## Chapter Eleven

The chapel was unrecognizable.

He'd been stupid to expect he might come here and find a single piece of paper from four years ago somehow, miraculously, intact. As though his marriage certificate could have survived the blaze that had shelled out their wedding chapel.

The story of the chapel's destruction and subsequent reconstruction was lovingly preserved on the unmarred white walls of the chapel's foyer. Image after image of fire and rubble, hardworking crews, the funeral of the priest. More images still of Pipe meeting with an architect, digging the first hole for the new foundation, laying the cornerstone, being blessed by the new priest and thanked for the great generosity he'd shown this little church adjacent to his hacienda.

Before, it had been a crumbling, ancient-looking structure, overrun by greenery and attended by only a few locals for mass. That was the main reason Casey had chosen it as the site for his secret union with Ilda. Now, however, it was a picturesque monument to triumph over cartel violence, an indictment of what the Orras organization had done on this plot of land four years ago, by the proud bearing of Pipe's colors—red and orange—on the plaque beside the front door:

*Born Again on the Backs of Friends.*

From his spot in a gleaming pew, Casey studied the pristine vaulted ceiling of the sanctuary, painted perfect white as with every other flat surface in the structure, clean wood beams shaping the interior like bones, a rib cage viewed from the inside. Behind the simple altar was an image of the Virgin Mary in her typical blue robes, a pink-and-gold crown of sun and stars glowing behind her head and a chubby infant swaddled in ivory cloth cradled gently in her arms. Lit candles flickered in front of the painting and on either side of a gilded box that no doubt served some purpose. Not that Casey knew what that purpose was, but Ilda could tell him, if he asked.

Sighing, he closed his eyes against the memories. Didn't matter that nothing looked the same; the last time he'd been inside these walls, he had



made desperate love to his new wife and believed wholeheartedly that their entire future was laid out before them, ripe for the picking. The universe must have laughed as it punished him for his foolish, naive hope.

She had been right to call him selfish yesterday. Her damning words had echoed in his mind for the rest of the day and well into the night, invading his dreams and greeting him upon waking. He'd been continuously smacked upside the head by the unexpected since stepping foot on Colombian soil, but instead of thinking like the trained tactician he was—looking at the bigger picture, examining the variables to understand how they'd affect the mission—he'd focused solely on what the new knowledge meant to him and him alone.

Before Ilda, he'd never experienced possessive need over a woman, and he certainly hadn't felt it since. She remained unique to him, and years later, the animalistic urges growled louder than ever. He wanted to stamp MINE over every inch of her body, put his name—his real name—on display for all to see. His mark, so that they'd know not to fuck with what was his.

Now that he knew about Arlo, it was a thousand times worse. He'd missed *so much*. First breath, first cry, first smile, first step. Instead, she had grown from baby to toddler to little girl in the midst of a bloody cartel war. For God's sake, there was a man with his lips sewn shut short yards from the house in which she slept every night. Everything in Casey screamed at the wrongness of this, all of this.

To the depths of his bones, he knew that Ilda and Arlo belonged with him, home in the United States. Watching Arlo learn and play, listening to Ilda sing...holding them both within his arms. His promise to Ilda on the day of their wedding, that he'd take her anywhere she wished to go, still stood. He could delegate some of his responsibilities in the company to his trusted seconds, Henry and Finn, and spend more time with his family. They didn't need to live in Boston; in fact, he'd wondered more than once in recent weeks if a change of pace in Chicago might do him good, somewhere near Beth and close enough to offer Vick an assist with the new Faraday office. But he intended to let Ilda decide, just so long as they got the hell out of Colombia.

That is, if she agreed to leave with him. He couldn't blame her for resisting. He'd failed her utterly and continued to do so at every turn. A

truth that had hit him hard the night before when he had finally gotten around to viewing the satellite footage Della sent.

In the initial aftermath four years ago, Casey had pored over the rolling image feeds, watching rescue crews rush to the scene of the burning chapel, putting out the fire and sifting through the smoking rubble. Members of the Orras cartel had bombed the small church firmly within Pipe's territory to send a message: nothing and no one was safe from Orras rage. Any and everything under the protection of the Marin cartel was at risk from its enemies. As though assassinating Théa wasn't message enough. The structure had collapsed shortly thereafter, but most of the rescue workers had needed to wait for the building to cool before they could dig for bodies.

After twenty-ish hours of searching, they'd pulled the body of the priest who had married Casey and Ilda from the wreckage. Casey had watched another few hours beyond that, waiting with wet eyes and damp cheeks to see if they'd find her. But when the crews broke for water, with stooped shoulders and shaking heads, Casey realized there was nothing left to wait for. No one had known they were at the chapel to begin with. No one would know to look for a second body. So he'd shut off the feed and told Adam to bury it in a file on the private family-only server—and to keep his mouth shut.

Last night, though. Last night, Casey had fast-forwarded to where he'd left off four years ago and forced himself to watch for the miracle of Ilda's rescue, a rescue he knew was coming, no matter that his fists remained clenched and bloodless for every minute.

He should never have stopped at twenty-four hours. Ilda had been trapped, fucking *entombed*, for so much longer.

A noise behind him, the sound of a door opening and closing softly. Light footsteps approached. From the corner of his eye, he watched as Ilda knelt in the aisle next to his pew to genuflect before the rustic cross hanging above the altar. A moment later, she sat beside him, slender hands clasped tightly in her lap and the faint scent of exertion clinging to her petite frame.

Silently, he handed her the water bottle he'd brought for himself, gratified in an undeniably primal way when she took it and drank deep, allowing him to see to her needs without argument.

When she finished, he broke the quiet, keeping his voice low in deference to the sanctity of this place with so many shared memories between them,

good and bad. “How did you know I’d be here now?”

“I didn’t.” Her gaze was fixed on the simple red, orange and blue stained-glass window placed high on the front wall, near the rafters to shaft multicolored daylight down on the altar below. “My uncle retired last year, to a cottage a few miles away. I told Franco that Arlo and I were going to spend the afternoon with him, then put her down for a nap and left out the back. My uncle is watching her until I return.”

“You walked *miles* in this heat?” He didn’t like that.

“No, I ran.” Crossing her legs, she bounced her dangling foot, showing off a dusty running shoe. “Did you find what you wanted?”

*What he wanted.* He barely controlled a wince at her words, the exhaustion in her husky voice, remembering too well her accusation. “How did your meeting at the school for the deaf go this morning?”

For the first time since arriving, Ilda looked at him, and he met her dark gaze, wondering what she saw in his face. “How do you know about that?”

He shrugged, not especially keen to admit that he’d followed her—and Pipe and Arlo—like a sad creeper from the gates of the hacienda to the school’s front door. Instead, he waited for her to answer, hoping she would give him this much. Just this tiny peek into his daughter’s life, please. *Please.*

A heavy sigh preceded her capitulation. “She’s so smart, Casí. My baby is so smart, but she can’t communicate.” Ilda slumped back against the pew. “Right around the time Arlo turned two, we realized she was watching our mouths, trying to see the shapes our lips made, and she would mimic the shapes, but with no sound. We worked with her to develop a system of hand gestures so she could tell us what she needed, but we’ve hit a wall. So has she.” Shoulders hiking up around her ears, Ilda shot him a sideways glance, as though worried he judged her for doing the best she could in a difficult situation. *Silly woman.* “I’m worried about her cognitive development if we can’t learn to effectively communicate. I can tell that Arlo is frustrated when I don’t understand her, because *she* knows what she wants, but sometimes all we can do is look at one another and frown.”

Weariness weighted each word, and Casey linked his fingers together to keep from reaching for her. “Three seems so young to start school.”

“The administrator told us this morning that we were *late.*” Ilda pinched the bridge of her nose. “Apparently, Arlo ought to have been learning to

sign at eighteen months. Of course, this school didn't even exist in Medellín until a year ago, but that didn't stop this woman from basically calling me a bad mother."

Anger choked him. "Bitch."

"Agreed." A smile ghosted across her lips before she sobered. "Anyway, we've got Arlo enrolled starting in two weeks. I'll take classes with her in the mornings, so that we're learning the signs together, and then she will socialize with other hearing-impaired children in the afternoons. And eventually, maybe I'll stop feeling like I've completely failed my child."

Unable to keep his distance at the obvious evidence of her hurt, Casey settled an arm around her slim shoulders and tugged her tight to his side. Ilda snuggled in with a shaky exhalation, head resting on his shoulder, and together, they sat in comfortable quiet, breathing in the cool chapel air. A temporary détente, and a welcome one. He permitted himself a moment of simply enjoying the feel of her curvy body pressed to his harder lines. He stroked the warm bare skin of her upper arm, revealed in the athletic mesh tank top she wore, momentarily shell-shocked at the privilege she was granting him, a privilege he hadn't imagined would again be his.

He dipped his head, pressing his lips to her crown and the wild curls she'd once again constrained in a vicious braid. She tensed but said nothing, and he took that as a victory, however small. "I finally know what happened here, to you."

"Funny, so do I."

He swallowed his smile at her tart tone. "Four years ago, when I made it home, I had satellite footage pulled of the time the chapel was bombed."

"You can just...do that? Pull satellite footage?"

"Perk of the job." Really, there was no need to freak her out with exactly how deep his family could dig. "What I'm trying to say is that I only watched the first twenty-four hours after the bombing, the first time around. I thought—I assumed—you'd died." Casey cleared his throat. "I didn't know I'd need to watch for thirty-seven hours to witness your rescue."

"I was in the basement." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "There was shouting, and the priest knew I wasn't supposed to be found here, so he had me go downstairs while he investigated. I'd barely made it to the bottom of the steps when the explosion happened. The door slammed shut,

and bricks...buried me. I was unconscious for a long time. I woke up when the fire reached the basement. My shoulders were shredded.”

His arm tightened around her as he angled his head to glance at her shoulder blades. There beneath the hot-pink mesh were jagged white scars, pale against her sun-dark skin. “Oh, baby. I’m so sorry.”

It was as though she didn’t hear him. Or maybe she simply didn’t care what he said. “I prayed for life, for death. For you to come for me.”

He swallowed past the knot in his throat. “But I didn’t come,” he muttered, already hating her next words before she spoke.

“No. Pipe did. He literally dug me out of the rubble.”

Casey knew. Casey had seen. The footage showed Pipe rolling up in his SUV, a dozen brigadiers trailing behind, for what had obviously been a photo-op moment. Side-by-side with the fire chief, Pipe had walked across the wreckage, making a show of lifting and looking. Then he’d lifted and looked and found Ilda’s lone piece of luggage. Recognition had struck, and real panic spurred him. Suddenly, everyone was digging. Afternoon was fading to evening when Pipe disappeared from sight and reappeared minutes later with a limp, sooty, bleeding Ilda in his arms.

Hand to God, it was one of the most heroic feats Casey had ever witnessed, and Casey had seen some seriously heroic shit in his thirty-four years. “I will always be grateful he found you.”

“He more than found me—he didn’t leave my bedside in hospital, after. Then he brought me to the hacienda to recuperate. I had a broken collarbone and fractured femur and needed help with the most basic tasks.” Slowly, her hand crept over his middle, plucking at the heathered gray jersey of his T-shirt.

He waited, sensing her hesitation, but damn, waiting sucked. He generally bulldozed through most of his conversations these days, not tapping much into his well of patience since leaving the CIA and taking the directorial position within Faraday Industries. Ilda deserved patience, though, and understanding, care and respect, so he could keep his goddamn mouth shut long enough for her to say what she so obviously itched to say.

“I wasn’t fully healed when I realized I was pregnant, and I hurt too much to think twice about telling him. He guessed, correctly, that you were the father but never said a word in judgment. He escorted me to every

appointment, took care of me when I was sick and then Arlo was born and he was *still* there. He made sure I ate, showered, slept.”

Pipe had stolen Casey’s life, his rights to the moments Ilda was describing. Ilda was *his* wife, Arlo *his* daughter. But there was that selfish narrative again, and Jesus fucking Christ it was hard to quell. “Was it...was it bad?”

“Let’s just say I never had that pregnancy glow everyone goes on and on about.”

“No, I mean after.” Though he hated hearing about her suffering. He ought to have been the man seeing to her needs, not Pipe. Never Pipe.

She fidgeted against him but didn’t shift away. “Only the early days, when Arlo was in neonatal care. He fell in love the minute he set eyes on her, you know. He and...and Théa, they’d wanted a big family with lots of children. Pipe and I grieved together for who—what—we’d lost.”

Every word was a blow to his gut, nausea churning. An acute sense of loss swept over him, roughening his voice. “And now you’re his fiancée.”

“He didn’t push me, Casí. He didn’t rush me or force me. At the time, I thought he was the best choice for my daughter. He’d be able to keep her safer than I could on my own.”

“I can keep you safe.” Outside of Colombia, they’d be safe as houses. Nothing and no one would ever touch them. “Our lives would’ve been so much different if I’d only watched the satellite footage a few hours more. I would’ve come back immediately and—”

“Don’t tell me what you would have done.” She straightened, putting dreadful distance between their bodies until he bit his tongue to keep from voicing a complaint. “Or what you tried to do. I’m not... I can’t hear it right now. Not on top of everything else.”

He drew his hands into his lap, resting palms down atop his thighs. “When you’re ready, I’ll tell you. Anything. Everything.” Not a single piece of information would be withheld from her ever again. Keeping secrets had destroyed them the first time around—he wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

Propping his arms on the pew back in front of him, he closed his eyes, unable to look at her as he admitted his failure. “I looked around for the marriage certificate, but you were right. You survived, but it didn’t.”

“Casí.”

Was that pity in her tone? Oh, hell no. He shook his head, shifting in the pew to face her with what he knew must be a fearsome expression. “I can’t abide by a proxy annulment, not when I know it was real, that *I* was real with you in that moment. And not when I’m not Catholic.” Pausing, he scrubbed a palm over his buzzed scalp. “I’m sorry I’m not Catholic. I suppose that’s one more lie you can hate me for.”

“Oh, Casí.” From pity to patronizing in two seconds flat. “I always knew you weren’t Catholic.”

His shoulders straightened, and he frowned. “What? How?”

A blush suffused her cheeks. “You’re circumcised.”

And Catholic men from South America, by and large, were decidedly *not* circumcised.

Well. That was one secret he couldn’t hide.

Ilda tugged her braid over one shoulder, toying with the neon elastic. “So? What, um, what are you?”

“Jewish.”

She blinked at him. “Practicing?”

“On the High Holy Days, yes.” His maternal grandparents had emigrated from their homeland of Morocco to settle in Toronto, where his grandfather had practiced internal medicine. Their only daughter—Casey’s mother, Sofia—had attended medical school at Harvard, met Frank Faraday during an excursion in Cape Cod and ultimately altered over two centuries of latent Protestantism on the part of the Faradays by insisting on raising her children Jewish.

Abruptly, Ilda stood, adjusting the hem of her tank over the waistband of her skintight black workout capris. “I know how badly you wanted to find the certificate.”

Light from the stained-glass window haloed her head, casting her in a glow so stunning she stole his breath. Looking at her hurt. Being near her hurt. Fuck, maybe he was a masochist, because he never wished this pain to end. “What I want doesn’t matter, Ilda. What *does* is bringing my brother home in one piece—that’s why I’m here.” He studied the play of emotions on her beautifully familiar face. “But you should know that I’m not going to give up on us. I don’t have it in me to let you go.”

Frustration won the battle for dominance in her expression. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “How about you stop telling me

what you plan to do and convince me to go along with those plans?” When he said nothing, feeling like he’d accidentally stepped on a landmine and not sure how to disarm it, she heaved an aggrieved sigh. “If you recall, Casí, I pursued you. I decided, after considering what I knew of you and the man you were, that you were worth my time and my heart. I must have had a reason, yes? If you want me to even consider what *you* want, make me remember that reason.”

After fumbling at her waistband, she tossed a folded paper into his lap, the edges blackened. As he opened the parchment with shaking hands to reveal their marriage certificate, she spoke, old pain layered into every syllable. “I took it from the priest’s office that day because I thought we might need it for proof wherever we were going.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, a hand lifting to her throat as she stared down at the paper he held so carefully. “I put it in my pocket. One of the nurses at the hospital, after...after, she put all my belongings into a bag.” Her swallow was audible in the silence of the sanctuary. “Pipe told me Casímiro Cortez had died, and I never wanted to look in that bag again. I had one of the hacienda staff put it in a closet.”

His hands smoothed over the crinkled corners, staring at their signatures next to one another on the simple form the priest had set before them after speaking their vows.

Ilda nodded jerkily. “You were right. I married Casey Faraday. I didn’t remember that you filled out your half of the certificate after I’d done mine, until I found the bag in the closet last night.”

The day before their wedding, Casey had been scouting possible chapels, needing to choose one that was out of the way but near enough that he could collect her as soon as the tactical team had completed its mission. Something about the priest at this chapel had gotten to him, though. A gleam in his weathered eye, perhaps? Regardless, Casey had flashed his American passport at the old cleric and passed over a decent chunk of change—for the donation box, of course—to avoid the necessary Certificate of Impediment he’d normally need for their union to be legal, seeing as he was neither Catholic nor Colombian.

Staring at the written proof of their marriage, an event he’d feared every so often that he’d invented in his mind, a tragic fantasy, stole his voice. He lifted his gaze to hers, locking onto the deep brown irises without blinking.



She stared back. “It was never filed with the government,” she whispered, “but in the eyes of God, we are one.”

“We are in my eyes, too, Ilda.”

Glancing at the watch on her wrist, she hurriedly exited the pew, again dropping to genuflect. “I have to go.”

He stood, slowly, his body feeling like one giant bruise. “How do I contact you?” These covert meetings, where he accosted her in public or she barely escaped her minders, were too dangerous to continue.

“Tell me your number.”

He rattled off the digits to his Faraday cell, not the burner of which Pipe and Manuel were aware. “You call me if you sense anything is off, do you understand?” he demanded, unable to resist issuing one final command. His nature simply couldn’t be stifled, not for long. “If they suspect we’ve been in contact, you call me, and I will get you out. We can argue over my high-handed behavior later, once you and Arlo are safe.”

Ilda gave him one last somber look before pushing through the chapel doors and into the midday sun. He hated the idea of her running those miles back to her uncle’s cottage, but they both knew he couldn’t drive her there.

Strengthening his stranglehold on the ever-roiling emotions he couldn’t seem to escape, Casey pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the marriage certificate, sending it off to Tobias before he thought better of it.

Is this legal if it was never filed? Answer ASAP.

The response came less than a minute later, and Casey smiled for the first time in what felt like centuries.

Mom is going to be so pissed you got married and didn’t tell her.

## Chapter Twelve

Not for the first time, Ilda wished shouting accomplished something—specifically, that shouting for Arlo when her daughter had disappeared elicited a response. But Arlo would never hear her call or the worry in Ilda’s voice. A blessing for the child, perhaps, but another stressor destined to send Ilda to an early grave.

Despite the frustration, she wouldn’t trade Arlo’s adventurous nature for anything in the world. Her daughter did her best every damn day to escape her nanny’s watchful eye, a veritable escape artist in training. The curse of an active child, but recently Arlo’s disappearances were compounded by Isobel’s divided attention. More than once, Ilda had seen the nanny away from her post, flirting with one of the newer brigadiers whose name Ilda didn’t remember. Until now, it hadn’t been an issue, but Arlo was not in any of her usual hideouts, so she made a mental note to speak with Isobel soon about keeping a closer watch on her three-year-old charge.

Passing through the tiled portico that divided the hacienda’s two courtyards, Ilda headed toward the entrance to the stables. It was the last stop on her list before she’d permit panic to settle in. Glancing around, she frowned as she noticed that none of Pipe’s brigadiers were at their usual posts along the edge of the northern courtyard. The sun was starting to dip low toward the hilltops, casting the sky in shades of pink and orange, and light poured from every window of the brigadier barracks.

Odd. Maybe that was where Isobel had gone.

A faint *yip* from inside the stables caught her attention, drawing her forward. Where that mutt Cerdito lurked, Arlo was certain to be as well. The aging dog was viciously protective of Arlo, having been known to bite the hand of even a familiar brigadier should one get too close to the girl.

The comforting scents of fresh hay, leather tack and horse assailed her as she moved down the center aisle of the barn. Several of the big animals nickered in greeting as she passed their stalls, following the sounds of Cerdito’s snuffling whines to the end of the aisle. The stable itself was constructed in the shape of an “L,” with the longer side aligned to the

western edge of the courtyard. State-of-the-art box stalls had doors on two sides, one set facing the courtyard, the other set looking into the aisle. On the opposite side of the long aisle were a series of older tie stalls, used now for grooming and tacking up. A huge set of double doors opened out into the grassy paddock, bracketed by the shorter leg of the stable on the north side and encircled by a pristine white fence. Jump the fence to the west, and you'd end up dead at the bottom of a ravine or impaled by a spiky tree trunk. The fence to the south, though, gave way to beautiful pasture, where several of Pipe's horses now grazed, running the length of the southern courtyard and the main drive down the hill half a mile to the front gate, where Pipe's property line ended.

Inside the stable, Ilda reached the sharp turn to the left that marked the beginning of the old, non-updated section of the structure. Beyond the tack room converted from three of the tie stalls lay a short row of empty stalls, and it was down that row she could hear Cerdito's decidedly frantic whining.

*Frantic?* Ignoring the unease that always came when she drew too near this part of the stable—unease she'd never been able to put a finger on, except that she never let Arlo play in the abandoned section—Ilda broke into a jog. Dark, it was dark, with only a workman's light with its single dim bulb hooked to the wall at the far end. The stalls were vertically slatted from floor to ceiling, unlike the solid wood loose boxes along the main aisle. Dutch doors with iron bars on the top half hung ajar on three of the four stalls, the blackness within eerily unsettling as Ilda passed.

Until she came to the final stall, its door padlocked shut and a bristling Cerdito alternately growling and whimpering as he stared through the slats. "*Qué es, cachorro?*" she whispered, dread curling in her belly. Grabbing the work light from the wall, she held it high and approached the slats. Her breathing accelerated as she peered into the stall, gasping at the scene illuminated not only by her light but by the electric lantern on the stall floor.

Arlo sat comfortably, *trustingly*, in the lap of a dark-haired male shackled to the interior walls of the stall. The shadows concealed his features, but it was obvious he watched the girl with unwavering interest. Ilda realized Arlo had slipped through the slats with two of her favorite rubber dinosaur toys, Cerdito's burly terrier body too bulky to follow her, much to his

distress. “*Hija*,” Ilda hissed, no matter that her daughter couldn’t hear her, fingers white-knuckled where she gripped the nearest slat.

But the man heard her, all right. His head snapped up, and another gasp escaped her. Irises of an identical pale gray to Arlo’s met hers, except one of his eyes had been blackened, ringed with fresh bruises, and one side of his lean, scruffy jaw was swollen and discolored.

Casey’s brother, Adam. It must be, but she hadn’t thought he’d be so...so *young*. Oh, Lord, he couldn’t be more than twenty-five, just a kid. His clothes were dirty but obviously stylish, fitted burgundy trousers, scuffed slip-on sneakers and a fine-knit charcoal crewneck tee that displayed the tensile strength of his upper arms.

And when he spoke, in English, his voice was so similar to Casey’s clear baritone that her heart stumbled in her chest. “Why does this pretty baby have my mother’s eyes, *belleza*?”

So that rare eye color came from their mother. *Arlo’s grandmother*. She exhaled in a rush. “You are Cay-zee’s brother,” she managed quietly, vowing then and there to work on her English. Perhaps if she asked Axel Moreno, he would tutor her in the safety of Our Lady.

Immediately, Adam switched to flawless Spanish. “You know Casey. This is...*she* is Casey’s?” He nodded to Arlo, who hadn’t yet noticed Ilda’s presence. “Holy shit, I’m an uncle.”

“Shhh.” She glanced down the hall but the stables were empty of all but them. “Be careful with your words.” If someone overheard, they—Ilda, Casey, Adam, Arlo—were in unimaginable trouble.

Dark brows lowered. “I keep my mouth shut, *señora*, especially when it comes to family. And seeing as you just called this little stunner ‘daughter,’ well...welcome to the family.” His chin lifted as he studied her. “I know you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I *do* know you.” His eyes narrowed. “Four years ago. He had me put an alert on the name ‘Ilda Almeida’ but nothing relevant ever popped up. You’re her. Ilda.”

“Your brother is here in Medellín, to rescue you,” she blurted out, desperate to talk about anything but four damn years ago. After meeting Casey yesterday in the chapel, after discovering that he had indeed filled out the never-filed marriage certificate with his real name—*Casey Aza*

*Faraday*—she was more conflicted than ever, the engagement ring on her finger a lead weight. “I can help you—”

“Don’t.” Adam’s tone was as harsh as it was soft. “Don’t help me. Don’t risk it. I’m fine where I am.”

Confusion had her frowning. “No, *niño*, you’re not. Look at your poor face.”

“Not a lot of mirrors around here. I can only assume I’m as handsome as usual.” He shot her a wry, lopsided grin, a dimple appearing and perfect white teeth flashing in the lantern light.

A strange sense of awe filtered into her awareness. He *was* handsome. More than handsome, actually—Adam Faraday was a beautiful young man, and he looked so much like Arlo that...that... *Oh, hell*. “Tell me. Has Pipe visited you?”

“More than once. Why?”

Shit, shit, shit. There was no mistaking the resemblance between Arlo and Adam. “And he knows your last name? That you’re a...a Faraday?” Her gaze flicked worriedly to Arlo, who was now making the dinosaurs leap from one of Adam’s folded knees to the other.

Adam swore as he caught on. “What is she to him?”

“His adoptive daughter.” Fear caused her to break out in a sweat, cold and clammy in the stale, warm air. “Tap her shoulder and point to me, please.”

Adam did so, expression grim, and Arlo looked over with a smile. But instead of running immediately to her mother, as Ilda had anticipated, she pushed up from Adam’s lap, turning to stand between his bent knees. With a dinosaur in each hand, she made the toys kiss the purple bruise ringing his eye before rising on tiptoe to do it herself. Her tiny lips pressed to his cheekbone, and Ilda saw him close his eyes, a furrow forming between his brows. Slowly, he lifted his shackled arms to close them around Arlo in a careful hug, his movements slightly awkward, and Ilda realized he’d never held a child before.

Perhaps Casey had never held a child before.

Casey had certainly never held *his* child before.

Heart in her throat, Ilda crouched down as Arlo and her dinosaurs dashed to the slats and shimmied through with ease. Instantaneously, Cerdito was all over her, licking Arlo into a giggle fit while Ilda combed her fingers

through Arlo's straight black hair, relishing the feel of the little body pressed against her side.

Her daughter remained completely oblivious to the upending of Ilda's composure, but Adam, chains clanking, certainly noticed. "What's her name?"

"Arlo. Arlo Beatriz Almeida. She'll be four in December."

"She didn't respond to me in either English or Spanish, or to any sounds. She's deaf?"

The hand in Arlo's hair stilled momentarily. "*Si*. How did you get her to come to you?" Sure, Arlo was friendly, but she didn't just go about sitting on laps and kissing strangers. Then it clicked. "Your eyes. She recognized that you have the same eyes." And if her three-year-old could see that, then Pipe would as well. He already knew Casey, as Cortez, was Arlo's biological father, but as soon as he put two-and-two together, between Adam's last name and Arlo's resemblance, Casey was a dead man.

She had to warn him. "I'm going to let Cay-zee know where you are, and then the two of you need to leave the country."

"Señora—"

"It's Ilda. And you can't stay. Both of you are putting Arlo in danger the longer you're here, so you have to *go*." She could only pray that Pipe would believe Casey hadn't told her the truth of his identity back in the day. There was still a slim chance he wouldn't punish her for Casey's lies. But only if the Faradays got the hell out of Colombia.

After hanging the work light on the wall once more, Ilda gathered Arlo in her arms, readying to leave. Except it felt...wrong...to leave the uncle of her child locked up at the mercy of his abusers. The wrongness twisted, setting her stomach in knots, and she hesitated, glancing through the slats at him.

He seemed to understand, and another of his grins appeared, this one strangely reassuring. "It's okay, *belleza*." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I got to meet my niece today. Even if you don't say a word to Casey, even if I'm locked in here indefinitely, today is a good day. I mean it."

And he did, she could tell. Tears welled in her eyes for this man she didn't know, not really, not as she should know the blood that ran in her daughter's veins. "I will help you," she vowed, the words breaking around the emotion clogging her throat. "I promise, I'll help you."

Adam shook his head, and his eyes briefly rested on Arlo. “That pretty baby, though.”

Unable to speak, Ilda hurried away from the stall that was his prison cell, Cerdito trotting at her heels. As soon as they were free of the stables and standing in the courtyard’s fading sunlight, she buried her face in Arlo’s neck and breathed in her familiar, comforting scent. “All right, my darling,” she murmured after a moment, lifting her head so that Arlo could watch her lips moving. “We’re going to eat supper in the kitchen, and then it’s bathtime.”

Arlo lifted her dinosaurs in question.

Ilda shook her head. “No playing tonight. Straight to bed.” Smiling gently at Arlo’s crestfallen expression, she carried her daughter toward the house as she covertly typed out a text message to Casey with one hand before sliding the mobile into her pocket once more.

Hours passed, and night officially fell. After a stern chat with Isobel about keeping a closer eye on her charge, Ilda kissed Arlo goodnight and hurried to the privacy of her bathroom. Checking her phone, she saw the notification for one new message.

## Estancia en la casa

Stay in the house? Was he serious? Despite the lax security of earlier in the day, there was no way Casey would make it into the stables and directly to Adam without her assistance.

I'll meet you in 20 mins

As she'd originally told him. He could bluster at her all he wanted, but nothing was going to prevent her from making sure Adam Faraday escaped Pipe's property. Tonight was the best possible time for this to happen, too, with Pipe in Bogotá on business until tomorrow morning. It was the *only* time for this to happen.

Stripping down, she quickly showered the day's grime off her body, ignoring the shaking of her hands on the loofah sponge as she scrubbed. A week ago, she'd feared nothing. She'd put her grieving behind her as best she could, loved her daughter with her whole heart and worked to keep them both safe in the only world they'd ever known. The hacienda was safe, for the most part. Their lives were safe, for the most part.

Not anymore. With all the subtlety of a charging bull, Casey had stampeded into their lives and upended it all. Now it was only a matter of time until their safety net unraveled completely, leaving Ilda and Arlo dangling by their fingertips over the cartel's shark-infested waters.

Her mind rebelled at the idea of Pipe punishing her for her past affair with Casímiro Cortez, but it wasn't like the affair was in the past any longer, was it? She'd fucked Casey Faraday in his hotel room all of five minutes after knocking on his door. She ought to be punished for that. Except being with Casey didn't feel like a punishable offense.

After drying her limbs and knotting her hair into an inescapable bun on her crown, she dressed in casual sleep clothes—black cotton shorts and a black tank top. If she was caught out and about, she could claim sleeplessness, since she'd already been known to wander the courtyards on the nights Pipe spent away from the hacienda. Slipping her feet into simple flip-flops, she took a steadying breath and descended the stairs to the main floor.



As soon as Arlo started crawling, Pipe had installed cameras in key blind spots on the house's first level. *For our little speed demon*, he'd said fondly, *in case she leaves us in her dust*. Never before had Ilda tried to avoid the sight lines of those cameras, but tonight she was thankful she knew where each was located as she strode purposefully toward the front hall. On the other side of the open-air portico was the conservatory, which opened onto a private patio overlooking the paddock. Some mornings, she and Pipe would sip their coffee on the patio and watch the trainers work the horses, content to sit quietly together.

Crossing the patio, Ilda bent to climb through the horizontal white boards of the fence, glancing over her shoulder as she dashed along the fence line toward the double doors of the stable. No brigadiers in sight, and again she frowned. It wasn't like Pipe's security to be so lenient, even when he wasn't onsite. All of his men knew the rules pertaining to protecting Ilda and Arlo only constricted when he was away.

The trainers never locked the stable doors—in case of a fire, the first priority was loosing the horses, which meant not waiting around for someone to find a key or bolt cutters while the vaulted beams along the ceiling burned. As silently as possible, Ilda shouldered aside the door, slipping through before shutting it behind her and pausing at the edge of the row of tie stalls to listen for voices.

None. *How was this possible?* Her nape tingled with apprehension as she hurried down the center aisle, darting through the long shadows cast by the ankle-high security lights mounted on the metal frames of the box stalls. She paused at the tack room door, peering around the corner, but just as it had been earlier, the older section of the barn remained abandoned. This time, though, the work light on the wall was extinguished, the only glow coming from the electric lantern in Adam's stall.

Not right. This whole thing felt *not right*, but it was too late to call Casey off. Not if this was his best chance to save his brother.

Swiping her sweaty palms over her shorts, Ilda jogged to the last stall but didn't approach the slats. "Adam?"

Chains clanked. "Ilda. What the hell? I told you not to—"

"Have any of the brigadiers patrolled the stable tonight?"

A heavy sigh. "Yeah, but not as often as they should. I overheard one of them talking about a stag party happening in the bunkhouse, so that's put

them all off their schedule.”

With Manuel accompanying Pipe to Bogotá, there was no leadership here to keep a bunch of drunk, rowdy and probably high thugs in line. “What is their schedule on a typical night?” She couldn’t ignore the prickling along the back of her neck, screaming that the risk she took was too great, too dangerous.

“Every twenty minutes, like clockwork. All day, though, it’s been closer to thirty.”

Ilda swallowed, hard. “I need to let Casey in. Alert me if you hear someone coming.”

More clanking of chains. “Be safe, *belleza*.”

Giving herself a slight shake, she skirted the edge of his cell to the unused straw stall with its rotting wooden feed trough tucked into the farthest corner of the stable. A single door with a rusted sliding bolt was fitted into the solid westernmost wall, dividing the straw stall from the outside world and completely ignored by everyone on the hacienda. The reason for that? The door opened onto the ravine, with only a very narrow footpath between the edge of the stable and the drop-off.

This was where she’d told Casey to come, though how he’d scale the ravine to get to the door was beyond her. That was entirely his problem.

Throwing all her weight into it, she shoved at the bolt, gratified when it gave beneath the force. Another shove and it slid back entirely, though with a cringe-worthy screech of metal on wood. Gripping the handle, she yanked it along the sliding track, again flinching at the loud noise, and she thought she heard Adam swear.

But no, the expletive hadn’t come from Adam, but from Casey, who loomed on the other side of the doorframe. His big boots spanned the width of the path, and his chest heaved with lingering exertion as he glared down at her in the darkness. “What the hell, Ilda?”

“You know, your brother just said the *exact* same thing.” Shaking her head, she stepped back. “Follow me. We don’t have much time.”

A hard grip caught her elbow, calluses rough against the soft skin of her inner arm. “I’m serious, baby. What do you think you’re doing, sneaking out here in the middle of the night?” She could practically hear his teeth grinding. “I saw Pipe drive out of here a few hours ago. Where is he?”

“He’s in Bogotá until tomorrow.” Tugging her arm free and entirely aware that he permitted her escape. “Do you want to get Adam or not?”

“Fuck. Damn it.” He shifted into her personal space, head dipping toward hers in an effort to keep his voice low and for her ears alone. “Yes, I want to rescue my brother, but I don’t think you understand what it does to me to see you put yourself in harm’s way.” His hot breath coasted over her cheek, sending shivers dancing down the side of her neck. “It breaks something in me, Ilda. It blinds me, until all I can think of is all the ways in which you could be hurt, or killed, and it’s like fucking losing you all over again. So when I tell you to stay in the goddamn house, *stay there.*”

She found herself leaning into him, a terrible melting sensation holding her internal organs hostage as she sought his nearness. “I had to open the door for you.”

“Jesus, Ilda. I can get through a locked door. That’s basically what I do for a living.” But he softened his reprimand with the brush of blunt knuckles over her jaw, and she refused to feel embarrassed.

Because of course he could have gotten through the door, she realized now, but she’d been driven by the same need that had demanded she become a confidential informant: Adam was of her daughter’s blood. She could not, in any manner of good conscience, *not* do everything within her power to save Arlo’s family. Her family.

Oh, God. Adam Faraday was family, just as he had claimed hours earlier. The truth of that hit her like a full-body blow, because if Ilda considered Adam family, that meant Casey was family, too.

Not just family—her husband. Her daughter’s father. The brother of the young man sitting chained in a decrepit horse stall, where *her fiancé* had deposited him. Casey was the one person she had promised to honor and love *for all the days of her life*. Death—his or hers, real or imagined—didn’t change that single immutable fact, or the utter rightness and sense of belonging she’d experienced upon saying those words four years ago.

Unable to control her movements, she rushed Casey, closing the scant inches between them and wrapping her arms tight around his torso. Her face smooshed to his brawny chest, she gasped against him, her body surrendering to the unceasing shudders wracking her. This situation, the danger, her feelings...it was all too much in too short a time.

Casey must have understood. His arms encircled her, and he pressed his lips to the top of her head in kiss after firm kiss. “Shh. Shh, baby, I’ve got you. You’re safe, and I’ve got you, and I’m never letting you go.” Another set of kisses, growled possession. “Never.”

His words barely penetrated, but the sands of their invisible hourglass did. Instead of responding to his dark words, she disentangled her limbs from his and grabbed his hand, pulling him silently into the corridor to halt in front of the padlocked door that hid Adam from view.

The glow emanating through the slats cast Casey’s drawn, rugged features in solemn shadow. “Adam?”

“Casey?” Shackles clinked noisily together, indicating that he’d stood, but it was the hitch in Adam’s voice that held Ilda motionless, even as Casey furiously worked over the padlock with a pair of thin needle-like tools he had magicked from a pocket of his cargo trousers. “C-Casey.”

Casey cursed, hands shifting. When he spoke, it was in English, and Ilda almost felt like a voyeur, hearing layers of pain in both their words. “I know, buddy, I know. Just hang on a minute longer for me, okay? I’ve almost got this...almost...*there*.” The padlock clicked open, and he violently shouldered the portal inward on its hinges.

In the space of a breath, he held his younger brother in an unbreakable embrace. Adam stood an inch or two shorter and at least thirty pounds lighter, and Casey held him like the lost child he was. One big hand cupped the back of Adam’s head, his other rubbing soothingly up and down Adam’s spine as the younger man linked his arms tight around Casey’s shoulders. It was obvious that if not for the shackles, Casey would have simply lifted Adam and carried him away.

Ilda’s heart splintered in her chest.

“Th-this is worse than juvie, bro,” Adam muttered thickly into Casey’s shoulder. “Like, a lot worse.”

“I know.” Casey’s voice was equally thick, emotion overwhelming the stall’s small space as he reluctantly released his brother. Pulling a penlight from another of his pockets, he aimed the beam at Adam’s bound wrists. “Shit. They let you out of these at all?” His thumb pushed beneath one of the shackles to massage the reddened skin Ilda could see peeking out from beneath the metal.

Adam shook his head and, with a quick glance from damp eyes to where Ilda stood clutching the stall frame with both hands, switched to Spanish. “And I was out cold when they put them on me, so I couldn’t even tell you who’s in charge of the keys. They’re so old school that I can’t pick them. FYI, pretty sure I have tetanus now.”

“How bad did they rough you up?” Casey spoke around the penlight he’d clamped between his teeth as he applied the lockpicks to Adam’s wrist.

“Not bad.” Again, Adam looked to Ilda, but his words were for Casey. “You’ve got a kid.”

Casey’s shoulders tensed, but he didn’t stop working, nor did he glance Ilda’s way. “Yeah.”

“She’s awesome, Case. Congrats.”

That made Casey pause, and he pulled the penlight from his mouth, flicking the beam between Adam and Ilda. “You met Arlo? When? How?” His glare burned holes in them both, but focused finally on Ilda alone. “You let Arlo come into the stables?”

“I didn’t *let* her do anything, Casí,” she snapped, arms crossing as she shifted her weight to peek down the corridor toward the tack room and main aisle. “Arlo escaped her nanny, and I eventually found her in this stall, sitting on Adam’s lap.”

The light bounced directly to Adam, leaving him blinking against the brightness. “You *held* her?” His throat worked for a second. “You held my daughter?”

God, would the beatings to her heart never cease? Ilda felt like a monster, hearing the yearning in Casey’s gruff whisper.

“Bro, what’s the plan here?” Adam lifted his still-chained wrist, jangling the links. “You get me out of these, and what? We can’t leave the girls here.”

“The girls.”

Adam’s brows rose. “Yeah. The girls. Ilda and Arlo. We can’t leave them.”

With a growl, Casey bit down on the penlight once more and set back to his lockpicking. “Can’t make her leave if she doesn’t want to.” And it was obvious that the bitter *her* in this statement was Ilda.

Confusion darkened Adam’s handsome face, and he frowned at Ilda. “You want to stay? Here?”

For the first time since Casey's reappearance, since needing to ask herself this very question, Ilda didn't know how to answer. So she said nothing.

Adam, intuitive creature that he was, immediately softened his expression, reassurance in every patient syllable. "That's fine, *belleza*. That's okay. You don't have to do anything you don't want to, and besides, our pretty baby's probably fast asleep right now, isn't she?"

Ilda could do nothing but nod.

"All right, then." His nod mirrored hers, and he jerked his arm away from Casey, much to the elder Faraday's displeasure. "Now's not the time to get me out of here."

"Adam—"

"Listen to me." Adam ran a frustrated hand through his overlong hair, leaving the unwashed strands sticking up in all directions. "It's not the time, all right? And they're not going to kill me."

"Oh? How do you do know that?" Casey's big body vibrated with barely leashed anger, aggression radiating off him in waves that had Ilda clinging to the wooden slats, splinters digging into her fingertips.

"It wasn't Pipe's decision to kidnap me." Adam propped his hands on his hips and shook his head. "I don't know if it was a favor or a paid job or what the deal is, but it sounds like there's been some sort of... I dunno...falling out, so Pipe is *pissed* with a capital *P*."

"Who—"

"I dunno, man. You need to pull Della in if you haven't already, and sic her on any money trails between Pipe and someone who really hates us Faradays, I guess?" Adam's tone was rife with agitation. "Anyway, Pipe being Pipe, he's come up with a brilliant plan to get me off his hands, since he apparently doesn't want me here any more than I want to be here. Go figure." He paused. "I think he's a minute away from figuring it all out, Case. Like, who you actually are. If he hasn't already."

Stilling, Casey glanced first to Ilda, then Adam. "Oh, yeah?"

"He looked at my face and didn't particularly like it." Adam tilted his head toward the light, showing off his bruises. "Gave me these himself once he caught a glimpse of my eyes. And now that I've seen your baby girl—"

"Shit."

Cold dread sank its claws into Ilda's stomach. "So...so Pipe *knows*."

“Maybe. Maybe not. No point in panicking right now.” Casey stowed his lockpicks, begrudgingly giving up on any plan to get Adam out of those shackles. “Pipe. What sort of brilliant plan to get rid of you are we talking about?”

“An auction. Total black-market, word-of-mouth invitation only, in-person, on-the-DL type of shindig, set for this Friday night.”

Friday night. Ilda struggled to keep her face a blank mask. Friday night, Pipe was supposed to be attending the Ascension Day charity auction and black-tie ball at the Teatro Metropolitano, not *selling a human being* to God only knew who and for what purpose.

But Adam wasn't done. “Think about it. The minute the various and sundry terrorist organizations of the world know a real-live Faraday is available for purchase, we're fucked—I mean, imagine what the press will do with this if it's made public—but Pipe stands to rake in millions. Maybe even billions.” Reaching out, he squeezed Casey's shoulder. “Best bet is to buy me.”

*Billions.* It was beyond comprehension, the sheer amount of money these two spoke of so casually. Ilda cleared her throat, feeling suddenly vulnerable, exposed where they stood, as if Pipe himself could see them. “Casí. We have to go.” She blinked against the unexpected tears and met Adam's sympathetic gaze. “I'm so sorry. I... I'm...”

He held out a hand, palm upward, and she grasped it, fingers clenching around his. “You keep our girl safe, yeah?”

Again, words failed her, so she simply nodded. Already she cared about this young man, feared for him as she had long ago worried over her sister.

A crash sounded from the main section of the stable, followed by raucous laughter and what sounded like a drunken rendition of Beyonce's “Single Ladies.” The brigadiers had evidently decided to remember their duties.

Ilda shot Casey a frantic look, but Adam remained calm. “Lock me in and go.” When it seemed as though Casey would argue, Adam shoved him through the stall door and closed it himself. “Go, dumbass.”

Hissing under his breath, Casey reattached the padlock. “I'm coming back for you.”

“I know.”

Light edged around the corner from the aisle, the singing growing louder, and they were out of time. Fisting the fabric between her shoulder blades,

Casey dragged her into the end stall, right on her heels as he grabbed for the sliding door. “Go, go, *go*,” he whispered, and shoved her through the door—right over the edge of the ravine, nothing but air beneath her feet, her body weightless with terror.

On a silent scream, Ilda fell.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## *Chapter Thirteen*

Casey sensed the moment Ilda lost her footing, the momentum from his push driving her forward into the treacherous ravine. Tightening his hold on her tank top, he yanked her backward, sliding the barn door closed as quietly as possible at the same time. As soon as that was done, he looped his arm around her waist and hauled her body against his, leaving her feet dangling off the ground.

There was no time to lose, on the chance he hadn't been as stealthy as he thought and the guards decided to investigate the door and what lay beyond. Steeling his grip on her, he grabbed the metal stake to his left and, planting one boot on the teensy path, swung them around the massive blue plastic rainwater tank affixed to the stable exterior. The metal stake, along with some questionable-looking bungee cords, kept the tank upright under the weight of the water it collected.

Pivoting on the ball of his foot, he brought them to a sudden stop on the other side of the tank, their bodies hidden from view should the door open. Feet steady on the path, he shifted Ilda in his arms until he brought her shoulders to the exterior wall.

Uncontrollable shaking had taken hold of her, adrenaline and fear coursing through her body. Concern gripped him by the throat, and he soothed her the only way he knew how. Crowding her up against the wall, he gently hooked her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, and let her cling. He pressed as much of his weight as he dared into her, knowing she needed to feel secure, knowing his hulking body had always made her feel so in the past.

His strength was good for many things, but none so vital in this moment as easing Ilda's fear.

Nuzzling her ear, he feathered kisses over her cheek, jaw, throat. "Can't believe you already forgot what I said." he whispered as he ran his hands comfortingly over her ribs, her hips and thighs. Up and down, back and forth. "I've got you, Ilda. I've always got you. Shh, now, shh." She trembled so violently, her face tucked tight to the side of his neck, and he

started to worry she wouldn't calm, despite the fact that she clung to his torso like a monkey.

"I f-fell."

*Never.* He'd never let her fall. "Nah, baby. Look at us standing here, safe and sound." He adjusted his hold so one arm looped beneath her bottom, his other hand continuing to stroke a firm, reassuring pattern along her side, cotton to skin to cotton again. "You didn't fall."

Her voice trembled below a whisper, but she was so close he needn't strain to hear her. "Because you caught me."

"I never let go of you in the first place." He listened intently for any sounds coming from within the stable, though nothing penetrated the thick old walls. Leaving Adam chained inside that dirty box of a stall went against Casey's every instinct, but he was smart enough to recognize the logic of the move.

Adam had accepted in an instant what Casey struggled to see—that until Ilda was ready to leave Colombia with him, he couldn't go. Before, he'd seen his heart as being pulled in opposite directions, that he'd need to surrender Ilda and Arlo in order to save Adam, or vice versa. But in a short few minutes, Adam had pulled the wool from his eyes and shown him that the three of them were a package deal. It was up to Casey to figure out how to liberate those he loved, in one fell swoop.

He could do that. He *would* do that. "Let's get you back to the hacienda."

If anything, she gripped him tighter, her thighs a heated vise that had him hardening against his will. The rush of action, the incredible nearness of her luscious body, the constancy of his need for her—worse now than it had ever been four years ago—it all wreaked havoc on his control, mental and physical. But he ignored it, had to, because this was not the time nor the place. They might be out of sight, but noise was still a factor, and Casey had done enough recon in the past two days to know there were cameras just around the corner. For all he knew, they picked up audio as well as video.

He enjoyed a little bit of exhibitionism as much as the next guy, but he wasn't a complete idiot. Not yet, anyway. He shook his head against her mulish resistance and placed his lips to her ear. "We can't stay here."

"Please don't move." Her hips shifted against his, bringing his erection in contact with her barely covered center. "Not yet. I'm not ready yet." Yearning layered her words, yearning and fear.

It locked him in place as unyielding as the shackles binding Adam's wrists. Worse still, she moved again, a melting of her softest place against his hardest, like a dance. He remembered how they danced before, and it always led to the same conclusion. "No, baby, don't do that." He stifled a groan as she committed to her writhing tease, grinding firmly over his cock. "It's just the rush, the endorphins."

"Don't care."

He nipped the tendon along her throat in warning. "This isn't the right time or place," he hissed, parroting his earlier thoughts, but now *he* needed the reminder. His hands fell to her ass, palmed those perfectly round cheeks and squeezed.

She gasped and gave a delighted little wriggle. "Time and place hasn't stopped you before."

"Ilda."

"No, no. I can be quiet. I promise." Apparently done arguing, she began to cajole, stroking over his shoulders, the perspiring skin of his nape, tunneling through his buzzed hair. "Please, Casí." Her lips pressed to his neck, beneath his ear. "Please, I'm so confused."

He leaned into her even more, relishing the press of her full breasts against his chest. "How are you confused?" The yearning in her voice morphed into something resembling pain, and he was helpless to not take that pain from her. It was his *duty*, as her husband, her right to demand it of him as his wife.

"Us. You and me, *marido*...we're a mess." Her trembling had him flattening her to the exterior wall, his bruising grip moving from her bottom to her naked thighs. She raked her fingernails gently over his scalp, her excited breaths warm at his ear. "I want to say I don't know what to do, but it's a lie. I *do* know. I'm just... I'm not ready."

She wasn't speaking of this, between them, but of his reappearance, his demands, how he was practically fucking begging her to leave with him. His selfishness was hurting her, but he didn't know how to be less selfish where she was concerned. Ilda, singular Ilda, made him gluttonous for every inch of her, inside and out. He was ready. No matter what she said, he was ready, but he knew enough to realize that he had no clue what it really meant to be a husband. A father.

*Reassure her.* His thumbs dug into toned muscle, kneading her, forcing her to widen those thighs just a titch more. He kissed her jaw. “You have to be so quiet, baby. Not a sound, understand?” A thought struck him, worry and wonder at once. “Condoms. I...we didn’t use one the other day.” And he didn’t have one on him now.

She tensed in his arms momentarily before melting into him once more. “I can’t get pregnant.”

He shouldn’t poke, he knew he shouldn’t. But—“You can’t because...?”

Her breath shuddered out. “Because I had the doctor tie my tubes after Arlo was born.” She sighed and buried her face in his shoulder. “It was a difficult birth, and...and I don’t know what you want me to say, Casí.” Her whisper broke with her next words. “I-I didn’t want any more children if they couldn’t be yours.”

His eyes went wet, and he squeezed them shut. Now he was the one clinging, his arms banding around her as he attempted to absorb her into his pores. He simply clutched her to him, needing to lock his knees to keep them both upright. Every breath sawed in his lungs, the humid night air expanding in his chest until his entire body was a giant bruise. He could barely process all that her statement implied.

That she’d suffered so greatly in carrying Arlo.

That she’d mourned him so deeply that she couldn’t countenance carrying another child—a brother or sister for Arlo—if he wasn’t the father.

That he’d denied her the chance at future children by not watching the goddamn satellite footage all the way through four years ago. If he had, he would’ve returned to Colombia, found her, taken her, *kept* her. He would have been the man to help her through that difficult birth, done what Pipe had and cared for her.

In the back of his mind, he realized as he inhaled her shower-fresh scent, he had thought he would get a second chance. An opportunity for a do-over, once he got Ilda and Arlo out of Medellín. It may have been skipping seven steps ahead, but he’d been banking on another baby with her, somewhere down the road. It wasn’t anything his conscious mind had been aware of, but now that the thought had taken root, Casey struggled against the onslaught of grief.

Except he had no right to grieve. He’d barely figured out the husband thing, much less fatherhood, in the handful of days for which it had been his

reality. How could he want more, already? But it wasn't more he wanted, only all of it. He wanted the entire daddy experience, every minute of it—but there were no minutes to be had if he didn't get his family to safety.

“You said to remind you why you fell for me.” She nodded, and he eased his grip, settling her against the wall again and sweeping his hands up her thighs to tease the hem of her tiny shorts. “I'll never know why you approached me in the first place, Ilda, but I know why you kept coming back.” Reaching between their bodies, he yanked aside the crotch of her cotton shorts, thrilling in her lack of panties as he dipped two fingertips into her wetness. “Oh, feel that. You know, too.”

She muffled her moan against his jaw.

He couldn't keep from talking. “I want my mouth here, baby,” he whispered, stroking along her slick folds. “Want my tongue dipping in, fucking you.” One of his fingers slid deep, and she made the best noise. “No, no, you can't whimper like that. God, it makes my cock so fucking hard, but you can't.”

Her teeth scraped along the stubbled line of his jaw, the hot, wet clasp of her a temptation he had no hope of denying. “Want another finger? Can you take another for me—? Oh, you good girl.” He had two fingers buried in her now, pumping slowly in and out, the rough pads of his fingertips pressing and petting against the spot on her inner wall that made her clench and gasp and scrape her nails aggressively over the back of his neck.

His cock hurt, he was so hard, and he shifted his hips to thrust against her, bumping his knuckles and her clit. He was uncoordinated, constrained and limited, but she didn't seem to care. Hell, neither did he.

Sliding his littlest finger through her wetness and between the taut cheeks of her bottom, he circled her entrance there. “Remember when you gave up this perfect ass to me?” He tongued the spot beneath her ear as he applied pressure with his finger. “Nod if you remember.”

Ilda nodded, her breath catching audibly, and Casey felt another piece of his control dissolve into nothingness. “Yeah, I remember, too. Can't tell you how many times I've gotten off on the memory of taking you here. That night on the roof of your building, when I slid in deep, filled you good and fucked you slow and hard. And you *loved* it.” He slipped inside then, effectively penetrating both of her exquisite holes. “So fucking hot, baby.

God, I want it again. I want this fine ass *now*, Ilda, but I want to take my time, and time's what we don't have."

Her moan this time was loud—too loud. Covering her mouth with the hand not busy pleasuring her, he leaned into her, using his weight to pin her to the wall, leaving her no chance of falling or escaping. Yet her writhing form kept rubbing him right, so right, and he reveled in the friction created by this new angle. "Look how wet you are, just from three fingers filling you."

Her breaths puffed against his hand, her tongue darting out to trace a pattern on his palm. To stifle his own needy groan, he sank his teeth into the side of her neck, uncaring whether he left a mark behind this time, laving the skin with his own tongue. "You taste so sweet to me, Ilda. Especially here." He thrust his fingers deeper inside her. "I could get down on my knees right now and settle you in for a ride on my tongue. Is that what you want?"

She didn't speak, but her eyes, when he lifted his head to study her face in the shadows of the night sky, pleaded with him for something else. Something more.

Withdrawing his fingers from her body and removing his hand from across her mouth, he gripped her backside firmly, tipping his forehead to hers. "If you let my cock inside you again, Ilda, it's because you want a future with me, understand? Can't just scratch an itch, even if the scratching is the best we've ever had. I love you too much. God, I never *stopped* loving you." He swallowed around the lump in his throat that told him the truth of it, even as he spoke the words. "I will always love you."

"Casí."

"If this is only fucking, I can't do it again." He bit back the name he wanted to give her. His *fénix*. "It'll destroy m—"

Her lips sealed to his, cutting off his words with a kiss that stole his breath and shredded his heart. That soft mouth, that teasing tongue, she drugged him, dragging him under until his head swam. Only a single point of clarity pulsed in the darkness, but he couldn't, wouldn't put name to it again if she wasn't willing to meet him halfway. Damn, even a third of the way would work for him. Just so long as she let him into her body, her mind, her heart and allowed him to be the husband and father he so desperately needed to be.

She broke away and settled her lips against his ear. “When I met you, when I looked into your eyes, I thought you were my missing half. Until that point, I hadn’t known half of me was missing, but it was. It was.” A gentle kiss to his ear, so soft as to be barely tangible. “That’s why I married you, Casey Faraday.”

“That’s why I married *you*, Ilda Almeida.” His cheek pressed against hers, he adjusted his hold on her, one arm looping beneath her bottom as he tore at his fly, desperate to relieve his aching erection from its confines and find freedom in her gorgeous cunt. Another tug at the crotch of her shorts, and he tested her entrance with his blunt, heavy head. “You ready for me?”

“Always, *marido*.” Her eagerness coated him, coaxed him. “Don’t let go.”

“Never.” Covering her mouth once more with his palm, he filled her with a single, smooth stroke, his forehead falling to the stable wall above her shoulder. “Oh, God, baby, it’s so good.” When they’d had their reunion in the hotel room days ago, he had been too out of his mind to appreciate just how glorious it was being bare inside her, but now. *Now*. Her heat was unlike anything he’d ever known, the silky slick grip of her clutching him so sweetly he could hardly breathe.

Each thrust of his hips threatened to jar her body against the wall, but he scrabbled for control because he knew the risk they took, joining like this in a frenzy, unprotected from the elements, from eyes and ears and terrible discovery. He could stop it, he knew he could, but it felt imperative that he not. Every time he entered her, again and again and again, this...this *thing* between them grew. It cemented, soldered, forged itself anew, and that was why he could not, would not ever stop in this moment.

Her moans were captured within his palm, her wriggling body a live wire as it met his. Her arms clung, fingers gripping with punishing strength for one so petite, but he loved it. Loved her. She responded to him as no one else, a match for him in all ways. His missing half. “Being inside you,” he panted, harsh, “it fixes all the grief, the pain. It makes everything right again.” Another thrust, another delicious dig of her fingernails along his shoulder blades. “Tell me it feels right to you.” But just as he was about to lift his hand, he hesitated. “On second thought, not gonna let that pretty mouth say a word. Don’t want you to break my heart.” And to hear her deny them *would* break his heart, fragile thing that it was.

Every slide was perfection. “I need this, need *you*, for the rest of my life, Ilda. Like it would’ve been, if...” He felt no shame in admitting this weakness for her, nor any regret in bringing up what he would have given her if only he’d known she still lived. The arm securing her tightened as his movements grew jerky, frenetic. “No future exists for me where we’re not together, baby. Tell me you know that.” And he lifted his hand from her mouth, bracing himself for whatever torture fell from between her lips.

Her inner muscles fluttered around him, hurtling toward the end, the very end. “I know it, Casí. I know it.” When she came, she dragged him along with her, into the abyss he craved only with her.

Gasping into the crook of her neck, he waited for his pulse to slow and his brain to clear. He was aware of the sound of her unsteady breaths, the sweat dampening their skin, the lingering aftereffects of her orgasm wringing him dry. When he felt relatively under control, he surrendered to temptation and nuzzled a meandering path up to her temple, where he pressed his lips in a tender kiss. His heart pounded painfully, filled to bursting with what he felt for her—his love for her.

For Ilda, and for Arlo. “I meant what I said,” he murmured as he withdrew gently, fumbling to right both his appearance and hers but making no move to release her. “You’re my future. You always have been.” His hands stroked down her back before he adjusted their position, until he alone carried her weight, the wall no longer propping them upright. “But I need to be clear about something.”

In his arms, his wife tensed, but said nothing to stop him.

“There is no world in which I don’t have a relationship with my daughter.” The truth of those words lay heavy in his whispered warning. “Do you understand? If that means I risk my life to fly down here every week and see Arlo in secret, I’ll do it. If it means I stay embedded in the Marin cartel indefinitely, then fine, I stay.” No matter that his days were already numbered so long as Pipe lived.

“Why aren’t you just...just trying to take her from me?” Ilda’s voice trembled in his ear, making him want to pet her, soothe her.

But despite the intimacy of the moment and the stark honesty of his emotions, he couldn’t soften. Not when his future with Arlo was at stake. “Because she’s your daughter, and I’m not a monster. I won’t lie, protecting you—both of you—is my first priority, and I’ll protect you better outside of



Colombia.” Giving in, he wrapped his arms around her fully in an unyielding embrace. “Let me take care of you, as I would have if we’d all been dealt a better hand four years ago.”

Her cheek rubbed against his. “I have to make the best decision for Arlo.”

“I am the best decision for Arlo, I swear I am. And for you, too.”

Pulling her head back, she frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

Casey’s already-aching heart wrenched sideways. “I mean that you’re allowed to choose what’s best for you, too. You can be selfish.” He watched his words penetrate. “You deserve to be selfish, Ilda, *amor*—it’s the rest of your goddamn life.”

*Please, God, let her be selfish.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# *Chapter Fourteen*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## London

Tobias lay on the bed, trailing his fingertips up and down Chandler's naked spine as she sprawled atop him. Perspiration gathered on his skin, and he smiled smugly against the top of her head, a cloud of honey-blond hair mussed from his desperate hands and soft along his jaw. "You're going to kill me one of these days."

"I'm glad you're at least aware I'm trying."

And he couldn't imagine dying happier than he was in this instant, sated but still inside her body, feeling her clench around him as the aftershocks of her orgasm faded away. "All I said was that I would stop having the jeweler send over engagement ring options."

He felt her grin against his bare chest, right over his heartbeat. "I know."

"And *that* made you jump me?"

"You've made me look at fifty rings, Cheekbones. I'm bored."

Except he knew better. "You're overwhelmed. I'm pushing too hard." His fingers paused in their stroking, and he frowned at the ceiling overhead. He simply didn't see the point in putting the brakes on their life together just when it had picked up real momentum. They were in the flat he'd purchased, the flat decorated by her twin sister, Pippa, to reflect Chandler's tastes; Tobias had wanted her to feel utterly at home in this space, in her city. The city he had chosen to make his home, as well, for as long as Chandler's work was here.

He wanted his ring on her finger, and hers on his. He wanted to give her his name, his family, his protection—not that she required any of that, but it didn't stop him from wanting to offer her these things regardless.

Shifting in his arms, she flattened her hands over his sternum and propped her chin so she could stare straight at him. "No. I want you to push." Her brandy-brown eyes crinkled at the corners as she pursed her lips, obviously unwilling to smile fully as she set him back on his heels. "What I *don't* want is for you to continue trying to distract me with shiny objects."

"Distract you from what?"

Her gaze narrowed. "You don't actually believe I'm buying this innocent act you've got going."

Sometimes the best defense was silence. Were he his own client, he'd definitely advise himself to keep quiet at this particular juncture. Instead, he

spread his hands along her lower back, reveling in the smooth, warm skin that seemed to melt under his touch. Touching her was the craziest privilege, something he'd never dared imagine in all his years of devoting himself to Faraday Industries. All those years of eating, breathing, sleeping solely for the work he did, and what that work meant for his parents, siblings and the thousands of employees who depended on them for a paycheck every other week.

He didn't resent his responsibilities, not in the least, especially since he still intended to take on even more responsibility in the coming months. Tobias needed his siblings to step back from the business that was consuming their souls and keeping them from living full lives, and he was fully prepared to absorb the future fallout from their lessened leadership.

Mostly, he knew he could do this—take over Faraday Industries—because he'd have Chandler by his side. Someone who belonged to him and him alone. Someone who would challenge him, soothe him, love him...and protect him. More than anyone else in the world, he trusted her to have his back when the chips were down. No doubt the chips would be down more than once in their life together.

Which, of course, explained why he'd had the jeweler deliver engagement rings—in sets of seven, wrapped in black velvet—to their flat every other day for the past two weeks, hoping she might find something she fancied amidst the glittering array of diamonds and platinum. Because he was having a tough time keeping his mouth shut about the thing that it wasn't his place to share.

"Toby." Her fingernails dug into his chest then, hard enough to make him wince, sharp enough to remind him that no matter the uncomfortably domestic fantasies he sometimes had surrounding her, Chandler would never be a tame house cat. Honestly, he didn't know if he'd be quite so fascinated with her if she was. "You're keeping things from me."

"Never," he vowed, and it was true. He didn't keep secrets from her. It was one of the great joys of having found the person with whom he'd spend the rest of his days.

"*Toby.*" Leaning in, she nipped his chin, and he responded by squeezing her backside, reprimand for reprimand. "Perhaps it's you seeking the distraction. Worried about Adam and Casey, yeah?"

His head fell back on the pillow, eyes closing. “Yeah,” he echoed. With each passing day, he felt less and less in control. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Casey, because he did. No one alive was better able to rescue Adam. Mostly it just seemed impossible that they were once again in a situation where a member of their family was imperiled. Adam’s life hung in the balance, but so did Casey’s. So did his, and Gillian’s, and Beth’s. Vick and Chandler, Gavin and Della, Pippa and Keir and Freya. His parents. Every last one of them was under siege by forces unseen.

Who would be next? This was the fear that kept him awake at night. So maybe Chandler was right, and he wasn’t distracting her so much as himself.

Dropping a quick kiss to his throat, Chandler disentangled their limbs and rolled off the bed, and then he had to sit upright so as to watch her naked ass as she sashayed into the bathroom. Light filled the doorway, and seconds later the shower turned on. That she’d left the door open was, clearly, an invitation.

One he had every intention of accepting. Kicking aside the sheets, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, already feeling a slow lick of heat low in his belly—

His cell rang.

With a sigh, Tobias reached for it on the bedside table, glancing at the name flashing across the screen. “Casey.”

“I found Adam.”

Tobias hit speaker and left the bed, reaching for his trousers. “I’m listening.” As Casey gave him the run-down of not only where Adam was being kept but also their brother’s condition, Tobias moved from the bedroom to the main living area, to the desktop computer placed beneath the window overlooking Hyde Park. Dawn was creeping over the horizon, bathing the green landscape in shades of pink and blue. “Hold on—did you say *auction*?”

“You heard me.” Casey’s voice was grim, his breathing slightly rattled, indicating he was walking somewhere, and quickly. “Based on what Adam told me, it sounds like invitations have been kept completely off the grid. I’m talking literal word-of-mouth RSVPs. I can find out the when and where before Friday, but we might have a problem getting in the door.”

“When has a door ever stopped us in the past?”

“Good point.” A heavy sigh. “I could’ve gotten him out tonight, Tobias, but the damn kid wouldn’t let me.”

Tobias tapped out a message to Della, asking her to give him a call when she woke up. “Explain.”

“I...shit. Shit, shit, fucking—”

“Casey.”

“I’ve got a kid. A daughter. With the woman from the marriage certificate.”

Tobias froze. “A daughter.”

“Yeah. Arlo. And...and my wife’s name is Ilda.”

“Yes, I saw that.” Shoveling a hand through his disheveled hair, Tobias exhaled slowly. “Let me guess. Adam found out about Arlo, and Ilda, and refused to let you rescue him if you weren’t also rescuing them.”

“Bingo.”

“Which leaves us with this auction nonsense.” Familial revelations aside, this was the issue they needed most to address. Tobias logged into their private server and began clicking through their financials. “We’ll need to be prepared to actually *purchase* Adam, which means either an untraceable wire transfer or untraceable cash. You know better than I what sort of an ask Pipe would place on an opportunity like this.”

“In the hundreds of millions, easily.” Casey’s anger was a palpable thing. “Maybe edging into the Bs.”

Billions. Well, that would be more difficult to allocate without attracting an auditor’s notice, but Tobias could drain a few personal accounts. The business wouldn’t take a hit, and they’d get Adam back in one piece.

Not to mention, they’d be able to hold it over his head that they literally owned him. That kind of sibling negotiating power was priceless.

Allowing himself a small, wry smile, Tobias typed out notes to himself, action items he’d need to accomplish between now and the auction. “We’ll fly in Friday morning, somewhere rural outside Medellín, since no doubt Pipe will be monitoring the airports. Who do you want in your tac team?”

“Henry and Finn, if you’ve determined they’re not our moles. Vick. Chandler.”

That had Tobias pausing. “You want Chandler?”

Casey made an irritated noise. “She’s hella smart, quick on her feet, deadly as fuck, and for some reason loves you, which means she’s one of

us. So yeah, I want her on my team. I don't have time to protect your fancy ass at that auction."

"I can watch my own fancy ass, thank you very much."

"In case you've forgotten, people shelling out billions of dollars have bodyguards. She'll be yours." Casey grunted. "And then when shit goes down—because of course shit will go down—she'll be handy to have around."

Tobias scrubbed a hand over his face, vaguely noting Chandler's shower shutting off. "I think I'll refrain from passing along that you find her 'handy,' if you don't mind." He paused. "You sure that's all you want? Just four?"

"Okumura will need to keep the jet prepped, so... I guess that makes five. Oh, and Axel Moreno is down here, which you probably already know. Six." A beat of silence passed. "It won't just be Adam we're taking home. You know that."

"I know." Casey may have entered Colombia entirely unencumbered, but he'd be returning with a wife and child. *The lucky bastard*. "Though to be clear, as your license was never filed with the Colombian government, you're not legally married. You'll have to have the ceremony all over again in the US."

"Then we'll do it again," Casey growled. "And this time we'll do it right." More movement in the background, what sounded like branches whipping by. "Let me know when you're in-country. I'll keep checking in, on the off-chance I have an opportunity to get all of them off the property before the auction."

"Will do." Tobias ended the call, leaning back in his chair as he stared out the window. It was quite a view, he had to admit. An oasis in the middle of a metropolis, the dips and swells of treetops casting shadows over the paths winding through grassy planes. He'd realized not long ago that no place, outside of the Faraday compound, had ever felt like home to him. Having spent more time in hotel rooms than in any one place, that wasn't surprising.

What did surprise him was how, from the moment he had leased this place, before Chandler moved in and before he'd bought it outright, these big windows and tall ceilings and wooden floors had given him peace. Part of it came from knowing that this was *Chandler's* city, and *Chandler's* job

would keep her here indefinitely. He'd needed to be near her, even before he'd known with any certainty that she would be with him.

So perhaps it was really Chandler who made it feel like home. Her presence, both inside these walls and out, made this flat and this city the place he truly belonged.

Now he just had to help get the rest of his family home in one piece. Then maybe he could breathe a little easier—and turn his full attention to figuring out which ring would end up on Chandler's finger.

The padding of small bare feet sounded behind him. "Baby."

"Yes?" He typed one last note to himself, ready to move toward the kitchen and make them both a cup of coffee.

"No." Chandler's voice trembled. "*Baby.*"

When he turned in the chair, it was to see Chandler in a green towel, damp hair clinging to her cheeks and neck, holding a white plastic stick. Holding it, and staring at it like it might combust at any second.

"Sweetheart?"

"I'd wondered, yeah? After the Fadel House party, and we...with no condom..." Her wide eyes lifted to his. "So I bought a test, but I didn't think it would... I mean...no. No."

A lump formed in his throat as he stood, slowly, and approached her where she leaned against the wall. "No?" He couldn't seem to do anything but respond with questions, at a loss for words as he never at any time in his life had been before.

Chandler's shoulders lifted in a jerky shrug, water droplets still clinging to her creamy skin. "I love you," she said, husky voice panicked.

He closed the distance between them, sliding a firm, reassuring hand around her nape. "I love you."

"I'm pregnant." She stared up at him, wild eyed, and turned the plastic stick around to show him the undeniable plus sign. "We're pregnant?"

Gently, he took the stick from her and slid it into his pocket. His hand slipped from the back of her neck to the base of her spine, pulling her into an embrace, his other arm wrapping securely around her shoulders. Her cheek rested on his chest, her body tense as hell, but with each passing second, she relaxed in his hold. Eventually, a heavy breath shuddered from her lungs, and her arms looped around his waist, melting into him.



His mind raced. They needed to make an appointment with an ob-gyn right away. Well, first he needed to vet potential ob-gyns and run federal background checks on them, then they would make an appointment. She'd need vitamin supplements, and, knowing his mother, Sofia Faraday would want to weigh in on such matters. This flat wasn't big enough for a child, with only the single bedroom, but it shouldn't be too hard to purchase the other three top-floor flats, blow out the walls and turn this into a massive penthouse suite. If he got a contractor in here this afternoon, there was no reason the renovation couldn't be done in a few short months. Then they'd have enough room for his entire family to stay when they visited, and if Chandler got pregnant again—

Oh, God. Chandler was *pregnant*.

Dropping to his knees, Tobias buried his face against her flat, toned belly, covered by the soft nap of the towel. "We're pregnant," he murmured, confirming her question. "Chandler...are you—?"

"Happy, Toby. I'm happy." Her fingers sifted through his hair, petting him in soothing strokes. "Terrified, but happy."

Just when he thought he could not possibly love her more. He gripped her hips and tilted his head back to stare into her heart-shaped face. "Don't think I'm not scared, too. But...are we ready for this?"

"Ah, Toby. Remember who we are." Her smile positively glowed as she fisted the hand in his hair, the tug on his scalp a gentle admonishment. "So long as you're with me, *ready* doesn't begin to describe us."

## Chapter Fifteen

Casey had a bad, bad, very *fucking* bad feeling about this.

It was Thursday night—nearly a week since Adam had been taken, one day since Casey had last laid eyes on him...one arduous day since he'd been buried deep inside Ilda, halfway down the path to forgetting his name and saying good-goddamn-bye to the entire reason he'd come to Colombia in the first place. Casey stood along the wall of the hacienda's spacious formal dining room, his skin crawling with foreboding as he watched Pipe and his brigadiers share a splendid supper with the entire inner sanctum of the Orras cartel.

Pipe, his brigadiers, their mortal enemies, and Ilda.

Under normal circumstances, Casey would never have been permitted to attend such a function, surprise though it was. But hours earlier, Pipe had called and demanded Casey not only show up, but that he stand off to the side in the room, closer to Ilda than any of the other guards.

For a moment, Casey had wondered if this was some sort of punishment or a malicious, taunting test. Put the object of his most fervent desire in front of him and tell him he could only look but never touch. Then his brain clicked back on, and he was able to read between the lines.

He was there to protect Ilda. If something went wrong—and how could something *not* go wrong in this situation—Pipe knew Casey would throw himself in front of a bullet for her, when any other brigadier would lunge to shield Pipe. Somehow, Casey had become Pipe's best bet for keeping Ilda alive in a volatile situation, the only person the drug lord trusted to put her safety first.

Except Casey didn't understand why Ilda was here to begin with, not when all of his senses were pulling an Ackbar, screaming, *It's a trap!*

For the past hour, he'd stood silently off to the side, unable to keep his gaze locked on any one thing—not even Ilda. She was so beautiful, his stomach hurt. Hair twisted into an intricately looped coil pinned tight to the back of her head, she looked elegant and surprisingly serene, at least on the surface. Her black silk jumpsuit flowed over her curves, leaving her

shoulders enticingly bare, with only a hint of cleavage in the halter's modest V-neck. Beneath the long table—a table reminiscent of some medieval English lord's—her feet tapped nervously in their red stiletto heels, the candy-apple shade a match to her lush, painted lips.

Pipe's engagement ring glittered on her finger, making a mockery of everything Casey knew in his heart to be true. Of what he believed, deep down, Ilda knew, as well. Hell, she'd told him as much—right before he came inside her.

But this dinner was odd. Uncomfortable. Wrong. Casey feared it had more to do with his presence on the hacienda grounds than any of them realized. There was every possibility that Pipe had already tied Adam to Arlo, Arlo to Casey, and Casey to Adam. Every minute spent here, holding tight to his cover, put everyone he loved in jeopardy.

Tomorrow night couldn't come soon enough.

The staff moved inconspicuously in and around those seated at the table, removing dinner plates, refilling wineglasses and placing delicate dessert dishes in front of everyone. Conversation dwindled to the occasional low murmur, and eventually Pipe cleared his throat. "The tension in this room, my friends...perhaps I ought to tell you why I called for this détente?"

Laughter greeted his charming grin, Pipe falling immediately into the role he often played so well—that of the genial businessman who'd risen to great heights in the global power game. "Ciro, have you shared our story with them?"

Ciro Orras, the grandfatherly kingpin of the Orras cartel, a spry eighty if he was a day, exhaled deeply, the sigh of a man settling in for a long and no doubt exaggerated tale. "Once upon a time, I was a much younger man."

Pipe laughed as though genuinely amused. As though he wasn't staring down the individual responsible for his first fiancée's death. "If that's where you're starting, we'll never get to the end." Leaning his elbows on the table, he took in the interested gazes of the various cartel members. "Some of you may know, some of you may not, but back when I was merely a youthful venture capitalist, it was *Ciro Orras* who recruited me to play financier for the People's Army."

The People's Army, otherwise known as FARC. When Casey had first been sent undercover, it was because the CIA wanted to know how best to destabilize the money flow that kept FARC alive. But while inside the

Marin cartel, it had become apparent to Casey that a majority of the cocaine trade coming into the United States via the coastal ports was not from multiple Colombian and Venezuelan sources, as had been believed, but originating from lands and facilities owned solely by one Felipe Marin Donado. That information, provided by Casey to his agency, went a long way toward changing how the DEA and Interpol viewed Pipe's activities.

The Orras cartel, on the other hand, focused primarily on money laundering—or had, until four years ago, when Pipe had decided he wanted the majority share of that pie, as well. He'd poached Ciro Orras's business, cartel business, and after a particularly lucrative coup, Ciro had decided to strike back.

"He taught me everything I needed to know to grow into the force I am now," Pipe continued. "One to be reckoned with, wouldn't you say?" There was a murmur of agreement. "I wouldn't be the man I am today without Ciro's guidance...though perhaps he'd prefer if I didn't credit him quite so much."

Ciro chuckled good-naturedly and waved him off, leaving Casey to wonder if he'd stepped into some alternate reality, where old grievances were not merely forgotten but perhaps had never existed at all. Too bad Casey couldn't shake the sticky feeling in his gut.

"One value Ciro instilled in me, above all others, was to cherish one's family." Pipe turned to Ilda with a faint smile, the gleam in his dark eyes calculating...and cruel. "At this moment in time, I can say I am the luckiest of men, with this beautiful woman who will soon be my wife and our young daughter sleeping upstairs."

The reminder of Arlo's vulnerability, one floor above his head, set Casey's teeth clenching. This was an impossible situation, his need to protect stretching him like taffy, until he'd hardened in this mutated form where he could no longer bend. He wanted to take Ilda from here, Arlo too, and Adam from the stables. He wanted to be home, surrounded by his family, with no danger looming on the horizon.

"But four years ago, I could not see past my grief. The love of my life, Théa Almeida, had been taken from me in an act of senseless violence." Pipe shook his head. "How far I've come. How far we all have come."

"It *was* senseless," Ciro admitted hoarsely, settling a paternal hand on Pipe's forearm, his expression regretful. "And I have wanted for years to

say how sorry I am that the situation...escalated, as it did. The intent was never for your Théa to die, merely a scare, to send a message to you.”

Pipe appeared to believe that about as much as Casey did—which was to say, not at all. Théa and her driver had been stopped on their way home from the rehearsal dinner, three vehicles belonging to Orras brigadiers barricading them in. Moments later, Théa had been dragged from the car, forced to kneel on the ground and shot in the head alongside her driver. The Orras blue colors were draped over their faces, an undeniable message.

Casey caught Ilda dabbing at her eyes with her napkin, and new rage threatened. Why had Pipe insisted she attend this madness? For a man who claimed to love her, Pipe sure seemed perfectly fine with causing her pain. Casey, on the other hand, felt boxed in, pressed from the inside out to soothe her obvious grief. He remembered Théa, though he hadn’t known her well, but she’d been more than Ilda’s sister and singing partner—she’d been her best friend.

That sort of loss didn’t leave a body in four short years.

“Regardless, it’s time for peace, wouldn’t you agree?” Pipe pushed back from his chair and stood, lifting his wineglass for a toast. “Ciro, old friend, the roots of your empire dig deep, while the branches of mine reach toward the sky. There is a part of me that wishes to suggest we join forces.”

Ciro’s weathered face creased as he smiled. “*Niño*, you don’t know how this pleases me.” He lifted his own glass, and the others began to follow suit.

“I said a part of me.” Pipe’s answering smile was a sharp, feral thing. “But the rest of me struggles to see past the pain we’ve inflicted on one another throughout the years. So much pain, *Ciro*. Can you remember it, imagine it?”

Soberly, *Ciro* nodded. “I can. I can.”

But Pipe shook his head, and from the corner of Casey’s eye, he saw Manuel slip from the room, disappearing like a wraith. “I’m not so sure. But I do believe I’ve landed upon a solution to end our feud.” When *Ciro* gave Pipe an encouraging nod, he continued. “Recently, I’ve come into an unexpected windfall. Something better than money, of course, since neither of us needs more of that.”

Tentative chuckles rumbled around the table, but Casey felt his stomach sink.

“So, no, this windfall wasn’t monetary, but a blessing nonetheless. And tonight, as we sit here together in the spirit of reconciliation, we’re going to witness the power of this blessing.” Pipe crossed himself...just as a terribly familiar high-pitched whistling hit Casey’s ears.

The missiles. The missiles Casey had brought in exchange for making inroads with Pipe and the Marin cartel. The missiles not yet on the market, even for the US government, because Gillian had sent them to Chicago for beta testing in the empty fields of southern Illinois. The missiles that aimed for those who carried the same DNA as that of the individual whose strand had been sampled and input into the launcher’s targeting system.

Vicente, the snitch. Locked—and stitched—up in the barracks, he’d no doubt unwillingly donated his blood several times over, and as Pipe had shared, the ex-brigadier’s grandmother was *Ciro Orras’s* sister.

In the distance, a boom echoed.

Pipe smiled. “Ah. The blessing.”

*What have I done?* Casey fought the urge to be sick where he stood as the implications of what he and his family had permitted to happen overwhelmed him. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t pulled the proverbial trigger—they had knowingly, willingly handed a known criminal waging a very public territorial war the means to end that war.

The first time Faraday weapons were in the possession of an entity other than the US government, and this was what happened. Entire families, destroyed. Children, the elderly—generations of men and women who’d always lived on the other side of the city, most of them content in their day-to-day lives, wiped out.

All because Casey had wanted to play the hero and bring his little brother home.

Until this moment, he’d thought there was nothing he wouldn’t do to protect his family, no line he wouldn’t cross. Hell, Tobias had murdered Russian arms dealer Karlin Kedrov for what the evil man had done to their younger sister, Beth, and Casey had proven on more than one occasion that he refused to back down from a threat, especially against his loved ones.

But this...this was genocide. No six degrees of separation, nothing but the knowledge that he—and he alone—had given a villain the means by which to commit it.

When Adam found out, his softhearted brother was never going to speak to him again. Casey didn't doubt that Adam would rather have stayed locked up for eternity, or perhaps even die, than to know that, in an effort to save him, hundreds of innocents had lost their lives.

Ilda had called him selfish the other day. Good God, she didn't even know the half of it. Selfishness, ego, the arrogance that had made their family business what it was...it had led them to this point, this moment, when Casey was forced to silently reckon with truths he'd never anticipated battling all while remaining absolutely still, not able to break his cover in a room filled with two dozen of his enemies.

Not able to do a thing except accept that he was, perhaps, as heinous a man as Pipe. As Ilda had said, at least Pipe had never pretended to be something he wasn't—a good man. But until this second in time, Casey had believed himself to be better than that. Better than the Pipes and the Ciroso and the Karlins of the world.

As cell phones belonging to the Orras men around the table began to ring, Casey knew he was not better at all. Never had been. Never would be.

"Your loved ones are calling," Pipe said calmly, as though the shrill, panicky ringing didn't set his teeth on edge one bit. "You should answer."

Some men scrambled for their phones, others warily reaching into their pockets. One by one, they answered, and tinny screams filled the room. A spill of Spanish so hoarse and so fast, so broken, that Casey, for all his fluency, couldn't catch more than a third of what was being said.

*Fire.*

*Explosion.*

*Blood. So much blood.*

*Everyone's gone, abuelo. Everyone...*

Lifting his wineglass to his lips, Pipe sipped, utterly detached from the gasping cries, both from those victims on the phone and from the pale-faced Orras men looking to one another in desperation. "That," Pipe murmured as he set down his glass with a careful clink, "is the sound of your bloodline dying out."

Casey glanced to Ilda, his body ready to move, but she had turned to stone. Cold, gray stone, her lips parted and her fists clenched tight in her lap. She stared at Pipe with the same horror as the already-grieving Orras

members, appearing as though she might pass out at any moment. *Breathe*, Casey begged her silently. *Breathe, baby, and I'll get you out of here.*

Suddenly, she sucked in a harsh breath, color flooding her pale cheeks, and she whipped around in her seat to spear Casey with a panicked glance, brown eyes so dilated as to appear black.

She reached for him.

He tensed.

And Pipe laid a quelling hand on her shoulder.

Ciro turned tear-dampened eyes filled with helpless rage to where Pipe stood calmly at the head of the table. "Have you no mercy, Felipe?"

"Not once in four years." Then he inclined his head, and hell rained down.

In eerily synchronous movement, each of Pipe's brigadiers reached beneath the table, withdrew handguns and shot the Orras cartel member next to them in head. A series of quick, deafening bangs echoed in the high-ceilinged room, leaving no chance for protest or defense, save *Ciro*, whom Pipe cruelly, coldly forced to watch the murders of his fellow men.

Casey was already moving, lunging forward, but he wasn't fast enough to protect her.

Blood sprayed across *Ilda's* face as Pipe neatly executed his rival.

Hooking his arms around her body, Casey yanked her from her chair, blinking against the pink mist drifting down from eleven bodies that had been breathing seconds earlier and now slumped unmoving in their seats, holes in their foreheads still smoking from their point-blank assassinations.

Pipe's expression was blank when he fixed his gaze on *Ilda*, who shook in Casey's hold as he half-dragged, half-carried her to the door. "I told you there'd be peace in Medellín, *querida*." Carefully, Pipe set his gun on the tabletop. "Now, there is."



## Chapter Sixteen

Her ears wouldn't stop ringing.

So much gunfire, the shots in such quick succession, echoing off the high ceiling, and it had deafened her. Everything felt off-balance and...and *white*. It was as though she could hear noise, that unsteady shrillness, the buzz that zipped from one temple to the next and had her blinking back tears.

No. Wait. It wasn't the pain in her ears causing her eyes to sting, but what she'd just witnessed. What Pipe had just done.

Murder. Mass murder. Ilda could barely make sense of it, blinking and gasping, her ears hurting so much she worried briefly, vaguely, if permanent damage had been done. The guns were the least of it, as were the dozen dead men slumped at her pristine dining table. They paled in comparison to what she thought—wondered, feared—had occurred. That sound, before the gunfire, of something like a rocket taking off, followed by a faint boom, and then the ringing. Not in her ears, though.

The phones.

And then there was the screaming, the crying, like a recorded track trapped inside a tin can. The devastation of those voices, pulsing against her senses until terrified emotion choked her, froze her.

As they had died around her, she'd done...nothing. Nothing but sit there, barely breathing, gaze unable to focus on any one entity in the room, her thoughts narrowed down to a single word.

*Arlo.*

She had to get to Arlo. Right upstairs, short meters away from this massacre, her baby girl was tucked under the covers and completely oblivious to what had happened beneath her princess bed.

Her body was moving without her volition, into the darkened hall and away from the chamber of death. Steel banded her waist, lifting her feet off the ground in a jostled rush as the light from the dining room doorway dimmed with every step. She blinked again, recognizing the arm around her as Casey's, the faint, low hum of his voice strangely soothing against her injured ears, for all that she couldn't make out his exact words. Her hands

fell to his forearm, gripping, scratching, despite not truly wanting him to let her go.

Except she had to get to Arlo.

Her legs kicked, the sharp heel of her stiletto connecting with his shin, and she felt him flinch behind her, along with a displeased rumble deep within his chest, vibrating against her bare shoulders. “Arlo,” she told him—perhaps a whisper, perhaps a shout. “*Arlo.*”

His hand, heavy and rough, stroked over her throat, warm breath buffeting one aching ear, and she stilled, concentrating on his words.

“...where she is, Ilda. I’ll take you, but you have to tell me *where.*” Again, his fingers stroked, skin on skin over the tension knotting her neck.

A shiver wracked her, unpleasant yet not and having nothing to do with his touch. Only the situation she—they—faced, the terribleness she simply could not yet fully process. For years she’d been living side-by-side with a monster, not a man, had thought she’d known his limitations as a human being and what sort of villain he truly was.

Mother Mary, had she been wrong. “Up the stairs, to the left. Second door.”

At the foot of the stairs, Casey settled her on her feet, his hands steadying on her waist. “You good to walk?”

Not bothering to answer, Ilda turned, reaching for the railing with a white-knuckled grip and hustling up the stairs. She felt more than heard Casey’s heavy boots behind her as she fought to clear her ears. Swallowing, tugging, a few frantic pats.

“It’ll come back, your hearing. Don’t worry.”

*I’m not worried*, she wanted to snap at him. Not about her hearing. What did she need that for? No, what Ilda needed was her daughter, in her arms, immediately. And then she needed to get them off the hacienda and...and out of Medellín.

They couldn’t stay. Hell, she’d already known they shouldn’t stay, but now there was no choice to the matter. She had wanted that choice, didn’t want to feel as though her life were out of her control, or that she was dancing to another’s tune. Every other minute, it seemed as though unseen forces were tugging her strings and, by extension, Arlo’s strings. Ilda was willing to tolerate quite a bit to feel safe, but this, downstairs, wasn’t merely a step too far, but ten thousand steps.

Pausing outside the door to the nursery, Ilda exhaled a shuddering breath. “We can’t run yet,” she whispered, not able to look Casey in the eye as he eased to stand next to her. “Adam...there’s no way you could get him out of here tonight. Security is—”

“Tight, yeah. But, Ilda, if you want out, I will get you and Arlo out, right this second.” He reached into a pocket of his utility trousers, removing a black handkerchief and slowly wiping at her face. It was only then that she felt the sticky wetness coating her skin, which could only mean...*blood*. “Adam will understand the delay. Tomorrow night is soon enough for him.”

She shuddered as he cleaned her face, then dabbed at her neck, her clavicle. “Tomorrow.”

“The auction. We’ve got a plan already in place to get him—and you and Arlo—out of here following the auction.” He stuffed the soiled cloth into his pocket, then framed her face with his hands. “Tell me you want me to take you off the hacienda tonight, baby.”

“If you already have a plan,” she swallowed around the lump in her throat, feeling the hoarseness of her voice, as though she were the one who’d been screaming and not...not all of the innocents, “then we can wait.”

“Ilda—”

“We can wait.” Her decision made, she nodded and reached for the doorknob. “One more day, right? If you try to take us now, Pipe will hunt you down. You won’t get within a mile of your brother so long as he’s in Colombia, and we both know that.” She finally met his gaze. “Is your plan a good plan?”

“There’s no such thing as a good plan.” The pads of his thumbs petted over her overheated cheekbones. “But what we have in mind will work in getting all of us out of here, in one piece.”

“Then we wait.” Without another thought, she pushed open the door—and was rushed by a dresser lamp, wielded by the ferocious nanny.

“Isobel!”

“Ilda?” The lamp lowered, and Ilda took in Isobel’s frazzled appearance, dark eyes dilated with terror, before glancing to the princess bed across the large room. “What happened?”

But Ilda was already moving to her daughter’s side. “Pipe happened.” Propping her hip on the edge of the mattress, she carefully pulled back the

blanket tucked to Arlo's chin and stared down at her sleeping face bathed in the glow of the elephant nightlight on the side table next to the bed. All the air escaped her lungs in a whoosh as she leaned down to enfold her little girl within the protective circle of her arms, knowing it would wake Arlo and not caring a bit.

And, lo and behold, Arlo squirmed moments later. Behind her, Ilda heard Casey give Isobel a recap of the atrocities that had taken place downstairs, his voice clipped and without any of the emotion she was used to hearing from him.

"Where's your room?" Casey asked brusquely.

"Off the nursery." Isobel sounded suspicious. "Why?"

"Go there, lock your door and pack a bag. Necessities only, but don't plan on ever being able to come back." Glancing toward Ilda, he nodded, understanding somehow without it being explicitly said that Ilda would want Isobel to come with them when they left the hacienda. "You love Arlo?"

Isobel scowled up at him, fists propped on her hips. "More than you know."

"Then keep your mouth shut between now and tomorrow night." He opened the door to her adjoining suite, gesturing her inside. "Goodnight, Isobel."

She halted on the threshold, spearing him with a dark look. "You're trouble, Cortez. Always have been." Without another word, Isobel entered her own room and closed the door firmly behind her.

After checking the locks on both doors, Isobel's and the door to the hall, Casey turned to face the bed, shoulders pressed to the door as he stared—hungrily, Ilda thought, longingly—at the pair of them. "I thought you said she doesn't sign."

So he'd seen her speaking with Arlo, in their own haphazard manner. "Not any official language, just our own words."

"Some of that looks like actual sign language."

"LSM. When she first started trying to communicate, I researched *lengua de señas mexicana* because it was the most universal choice for Spanish speakers." She brushed Arlo's tangled bangs out of her eyes, smiling at her daughter though her words for Casey remained somber. "I began integrating basic words, to the best of my knowledge, assuming we'd eventually have

to take her out of Colombia for help.” Shaking her head when Arlo signed their word for *ice cream*, Ilda glanced to Casey, then shrugged. “I didn’t mean to wait so long to enroll her. I wasn’t trying to stunt her development. I just...it never seemed safe.” But that was when she’d believed wholeheartedly that the hacienda was the safest place they could be in a world filled with blood and bullets.

Casey took a step toward them, then halted, his gray-hazel eyes flicking between her and Arlo. “No one’s blaming you. Certainly not me.” He frowned when Arlo signed again. “What is she saying now?”

“She...wants to know who you are.” A question Ilda never thought she’d need answer. After hesitating briefly, she signed as she mouthed the words.

“And...and what are you telling her?” Oh, his voice. It sounded so nervous, so worried. So absolutely heartbreaking.

“I said you’re the brother of the man in the barn—Yes, with the eyes, princess,” Ilda confirmed when Arlo, quick little Arlo, made that most basic of connections. Fear gripped her once more, because for her three-year-old to recognize a relationship existed between her and Adam meant Pipe had as well. No more pretending they were still safely shrouded in his ignorance, not after tonight. The need to escape pressed on her, suffocating her with an anxious urgency. Her voice caught, broke. “Clever girl.”

“She certainly is.” Cautious wonder lurked in the quiet syllables.

All of a sudden, Arlo pushed Ilda gently away and scrambled off the bed, her blue-and-yellow sunny-sky pajamas a bright spot in the dimly lit space as she scurried for the toy bin that held her outsized collection of plastic animals. Two dinosaurs were procured—the same toys Arlo had brought into Adam’s stall—and then Arlo crossed to the middle of the room, where Casey stood immobile. She held up the dinosaurs in offering.

Casey looked to Ilda, helplessness written in his expression, but Ilda merely watched, barely able to breathe.

Slowly, he sank to the floor, legs folded beneath him as though he’d sat on a rug with a small child countless times before. His intent gaze never left Arlo’s round face, his attention perfectly focused, as though getting this right were of vital importance. Mirroring him, Arlo sat, then handed him one of the plastic dinosaurs, which his big hand with its long fingers nearly swallowed. In silence, he waited for a cue from Arlo.

Arlo didn't keep him waiting, immediately siccing her toy at his in a mock battle of teeth and claws. Casey held his dinosaur mostly immobile, paying more attention to her than to the playing. "You were right," he whispered, never taking his eyes from Arlo. "She's perfect."

And Ilda's shattered heart, so abused from tonight, this week, four years of interminable grief, began to repair itself. Deep inside her chest, she felt the ragged pieces stitch together, slow tugs of thread and needle that somehow didn't pain but comforted.

There, a few feet away, sat her daughter and her daughter's father, playing together, Arlo's expression innocent and happy, Casey's features softening by the second. It was a sight she'd never dreamed possible, and seeing it felt like a fever dream, something she had imagined only in the deepest recesses of her subconscious. It *shouldn't* have been possible, but here it was, happening. Right before her eyes.

They looked alike, she realized. The longer she saw them side-by-side, the more it became obvious to her. The shape of their eyes, if not the color, and the tips of their ears. The hair so dark a brown it might as well be black. Even their mouths showed promise of being similar, in time. Arlo's dusky skin remained fair with the freshness of youth, nowhere near as brown as his or Ilda's, but there was no mistaking the bloodline resemblance between her daughter and the man who was not Casímiro Cortez.

As Arlo went to the bin to collect more toys, Casey glanced around the nursery. Ilda's legs dangled at the edge of the bed, her tall heels scraping the soft rug, her fists clenching in the quilt. She wondered what he saw when he looked at the well-appointed room, the evidence of Pipe's excessive spoiling of Arlo. She also wondered why Casey refused to look at her.

"Did you ever love him?" The question seemed torn from Casey, so weighty that Ilda nearly rocked backward from the subtle force of it.

"That's a complicated question." Even more complicated now, given what was downstairs. Ilda shivered, her stomach knotting abruptly. "Or maybe it isn't."

"Explain."

They both watched Arlo as she returned to her position in front of Casey—this time with an armload of dinosaurs—instead of taking the hard road and making eye contact with one another. She felt too fragile as she fought to find the words, and to be *right* in those words. "I told you that Pipe was

good to me, to us. As good as a man like Pipe could be. But he never loved me the way he did Théa, and we both knew it.”

But Casey was like a dog with a bone. “That doesn’t answer my question.” He picked up another dinosaur when Arlo pushed one toward him, his movements no longer stilted but easy. It was taking him no time at all to fall into daddy mode. “You’ve been resistant to leaving here, and I thought I understood why. I thought it was me—I rose from the dead, and I kept pushing you and pushing you. I’m not a patient man.” Frustration pulsed from him. “But what if it’s not me who’s got you all twisted up and wanting to stay here? What if it’s Pipe? If your heart’s involved, if that’s what is keeping you—”

“My heart is not involved.” Ilda was more than a little surprised to realize it was true. One hundred percent, undeniably true, but something she hadn’t wanted to face in the years in which she’d been with Pipe. And, judging from Pipe’s psychopathic revenge for her sister just now, she would guess that his heart wasn’t hers, either. “I never fell in love with him. He was there, he cared for me, he adored my daughter. He kept us safe. For a while, I loved all of those things—his presence, his care, his safety—but I can tell you with all honesty, *marido*, that I never loved *him*. You don’t snitch to the DEA on someone you love, do you?” Pushing from the bed, Ilda came to kneel next to her daughter on the rug and finally looked Casey in the eye. “No. You don’t. But until you came back, I thought it would be enough, what I was doing to ease my conscience and the relative safety he offered us. I thought my gratitude would be enough.”

“Nothing could be enough when you compare it to what we had, Ilda.” His glare was ferocious, blazing, but his anger didn’t bruise her, because that fury wasn’t at her. “What we *have*.”

Before she could say anything, Arlo abandoned the dinosaurs and stepped into the space between Casey’s bent knees. Her tiny hands went to the day’s worth of scruff stubbling his jaw, and then she signed at him.

Tension seized Casey’s features, and Ilda knew what he felt, because she’d been where he was right now. The stress of not understanding what was being communicated, the fear that anything you said wouldn’t be comprehended in turn. “What did she say?”

Ilda reached out to comb her fingers through the tangled ends of Arlo’s loosened hair, the straight strands so unlike her own, silky between her

fingertips. “She wants to know if you’re her friend.”

His face an open book of emotion, Casey nodded at his daughter and was rewarded by her sleepy smile and small arms banding tightly around his neck. His breathing hitched audibly before his own arms gathered Arlo close. He held her, Ilda noted, as he’d held Adam earlier this week in the stable—one big hand rubbing soothingly along her spine, the other gently cupping the back of her head. A faint tremor shook his muscled frame as he turned his face to the side of her neck and inhaled deeply, his eyes closing so the lashes laid shadows along the battlements of his cheekbones.

He was holding his daughter for the very first time.

Ilda blinked rapidly, warding off the dangerous emotion that threatened to break this fragile oasis the three of them had built in the nursery for these few stolen moments. She could feel the joy radiating off him, so acute as to be painful, and when she heard his shaky exhalation, wet with unshed tears, a few of her own escaped to slip down her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered closed briefly.

“Hey.” A brush of warm, callused skin against the wetness had her blinking, only to lock gazes with Casey as he wiped away her tears with one hand, the other still holding Arlo—who was quickly drifting off to sleep against his shoulder—as though he never intended to let go of the girl again. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

His jaw touched Arlo’s temple. “For this. For her.”

More tears spilled over. “We’re coming with you tomorrow, Casey,” she whispered, making sure to say his name as it was meant to be said—as it deserved to be said. “We’re coming home with you.” Wherever home was, that was where she and Arlo would be, forty-eight hours from now.

“Then do the same as Isobel—pack a small bag, necessities only. Everything you’d take if you knew you would never return.” Careful not to jostle Arlo, who was close to drooling, he reached behind him and withdrew a gun from the waistband of his trousers.

He offered it to Ilda.

She flinched away.

The gun remained in his outstretched hand. “You know how to use one of these, yes?”



“No.” She frowned at him. “And I pity you the world you live in that you assume I would.”

“It’s your world, too, baby. Just for one more day.” He glanced down at Arlo before shifting his grip on the weapon. “This is the safety.” His thumb indicated a tiny plastic latch-like thing. “While it’s in this position, the gun won’t go off, okay? But I’ve got the chamber already loaded for you, so all you need to do is flip this in the other direction, aim it and pull the trigger.” He set the gun on the rug beside her, then lifted his hand once more to cup her jaw. “Sleep in here with Arlo tonight, with the door locked. You have your mobile?”

She nodded.

“You call me at any time, and I’ll come. No matter what. Understand?” His gaze darkened. “No matter what. But until you call me, you need to be ready for anything, and that means a gun. I promise, you’ll never have to touch one again after tomorrow.”

Exhaling slowly, Ilda laid her hand over the uncomfortably warm metal of the handgun, trying not to show her distaste. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Casey had proposed to her on this balcony, overlooking the courtyard. Though it hadn't been so much a proposal as a demand—which, Ilda mused darkly, must simply be his baseline. Making demands, expecting his commands to be followed.

So long as those commands kept her and Arlo alive, Ilda had decided she could heed them.

The view was much the same as it had been the day she'd said yes to Casey, warm air and bright flowers and a vista of hills and sky that reminded her why she loved her country. Colombia was beautiful, its people strong and courageous, and though she had traveled much of the world with Théa when their music had taken off, Colombia was her home and all she truly knew. She'd been willing to leave with Casey as his wife four years ago, willing to leave Medellín behind, but that sense of adventure had been stuffed in a box in the back of her mind and thoroughly ignored in favor of living in the present, protecting her daughter and forgetting she had ever recklessly given her heart to a man who had been little more than a forbidden stranger.

She'd often wondered whether her grief had left her more susceptible to him in that moment. She'd wondered if, perhaps, her body had fooled her heart, mistaking lust and compatibility for actual love. More than that, she'd feared, upon reflection, that she had been weakened—by violence, by loss, by her own need for affection and attention—when she decided to go all in with Casímiro Cortez.

Strangely, those concerns had been erased by his reappearance, this time as Casey Faraday. She *knew* who he was now, and deep down, Casí and Casey remained the same. Big and bossy, shoddy at shielding his emotions—at least from her—and a protector. He was the human equivalent of a savage guard dog, two shades shy of feral and clever enough to keep his wits about him, biding his time until the perfect moment to strike arrived.

Less than a week since his return to her life, but it felt like eons had passed, and she couldn't deny the truth rioting in her rib cage: Ilda loved

him. She'd loved him four years ago, below the surface and to the marrow of her bones, despite having only known him a few short months. She'd loved him for giving her their daughter, even when she thought him dead. She loved him now with an undeniable piercing clarity for doing everything in his power to enfold them permanently within his life, lifting them from a land where they could no longer flourish.

Her hands tightened on the smooth wood of the balcony rail. She ought to have taken Arlo from here sooner. She didn't have much in the way of savings—Pipe had started managing her accounts when she was hospitalized after the chapel, and, as his fiancée, she'd only needed to ask for something and it would be provided to her. Still, she had enough ready to spend that she could have bought a pair of one-way plane tickets, found a cheap to-let and gotten a job as a waitress to pay the bills. She could have done *something* other than subconsciously permit Pipe to have this power over her.

What a mistake. A mistake that had cost Arlo vital months in which her linguistic needs could have been met by professionals, and cost Ilda the opportunity to heal from her losses without the crutch that Pipe had provided. She saw now that in promising to keep her safe and protect her from the bloody war that had stolen from them both, he had reinforced its existence and her fear of being crushed by sorrow once more. He'd subtly, subversively crippled her, and rage at the realization left her shaking where she stood, the hills blurring before her tear-stung eyes.

That wasn't love, what Pipe had done to her. That was subjugation, and control...and it was something to which Casey, for all his macho high-handedness, would never subject her.

She stared blindly out at the landscape, but something sparkled in her peripheral vision. There on her finger, winking in the waning daylight, was the perfect platinum of Pipe's engagement ring.

A ring that suddenly felt like lead, choking the veins and bones until she no longer felt the pulsing nerves beneath her skin. Panicked, she tugged at the band, nails scraping her skin as she yanked the blasted thing from her finger. Without pausing to think, she drew back her arm and threw the ring as far as she could, hearing it ping on the stones at the far edge of the courtyard.

For the first time in four years, Ilda finally felt as though she could breathe.

Movement from the opposite side of the courtyard caught her eye, and Ilda watched, shocked, as Isobel glanced cautiously around before leading Arlo from the shadows and into the stable.

*What. The. Hell.*

Ilda was running as her anger crested. She'd *told* the nanny that leaving the nursery today for any reason was unacceptable, and Isobel knew better than to disobey, especially after the carnage that had occurred in the dining room the night before, despite all traces of evidence having been removed before Ilda woke this morning. Arlo's safety came first, always, and this latest infraction by Isobel would not be tolerated.

Avoiding the main level—and the hall that led to the dining room—Ilda took the circular wrought-iron stair at the far end of the balcony, clinging to the side of house and covered in vines. The courtyard cobblestones were uneven beneath her bare feet, but she didn't care, hustling through the stable's open doors and glancing about wildly.

There, near the end of the aisle, right before the turn that led toward the row of stalls holding Adam prisoner, stood Isobel, locked in a torrid embrace with the new brigadier, whose name Ilda still did not know. Arlo tugged at Isobel's hand, obviously angling to get down the dark aisle to Adam, her face crumpling with displeasure as Isobel refused to release her.

Ilda stalked forward just as Arlo let out a wail. "Isobel."

With a gasp, the nanny tore herself from the brigadier, eyes wide as she took in Ilda's glare. "I... I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have left the nursery, but—"

"No 'but.'" Ilda scooped Arlo into her arms. Fixing her displeasure on the brigadier, she asked, "Who are you?"

His gaze flicked to Isobel before giving Ilda his full attention. "Nico."

She took a moment to memorize his face, the long curve of his nose, the trimmed beard, the unusual pale green of his eyes striking beneath thick black brows. "How long have you been with Pipe, Nico?"

Again, the man hesitated. "Two months. I'm from—"

"I don't care where you're from." For the first time, Ilda embraced her position of power as Pipe's fiancée, despite having tossed away his ring. "Just as I don't care what you and Isobel get up to when she's off-duty. But

if I catch you near my daughter again, I will have Pipe remove you from this country. That is, if he doesn't decide to take harsher measures first himself. Am I understood?"

"Yes, señora."

"Good." Seizing Isobel's wrist in an unyielding grasp, Ilda turned on her heel and dragged the cowed woman from the stables and into the sunlit courtyard. Only when they were out of the lengthening shadows and in clear view of anyone watching—because something about Nico had raised the tiny hairs at her nape—did Ilda release Isobel. "What were you thinking?"

Isobel's jaw set stubbornly as she rubbed her wrist. "I was thinking I was saying goodbye, and that you'd rather I have Arlo with me than leave her alone in the house."

"You *told* that man we're leaving?"

The other woman rolled her eyes. "I'm not a complete idiot, *chica*." But there was a strange note in her voice, setting Ilda's teeth on edge and ratcheting her paranoia up several degrees. Isobel held out her arms. "Give me Arlo, and I'll get her fed and bathed." She paused. "And ready to go at a moment's notice."

Ilda stared down her old friend. "I'm trusting that you'll not let Arlo out of your sight once until...until tonight is over." Because despite the paranoia, undoubtedly caused by the nerves of what the night would bring and the new road their lives would take, Ilda needed to trust someone. Isobel, with their shared history in the 13, was by default that someone.

Kissing every inch of Arlo's round face, until the little girl was reduced to giggles, Ilda handed her to Isobel, signing in their shared language to be good for the nanny. Arlo waved, and without another word, Isobel disappeared inside the hacienda, leaving Ilda standing in the fading sunshine with her heart thumping hard against her sternum.

Reaching into her pocket, she curled her fingers around her mobile. She couldn't do this, couldn't hide and wait for Casey's rescue. What had she been thinking, to not pack up and leave last night, the moment she watched Pipe murder his rivals without breaking a sweat?

Her stomach heaved as she pulled out the phone, tapping out the number with the American country code from memory. But as her thumb hovered

over Call, footsteps sounded behind her, a familiar tread. Stiffening, Ilda turned to stare at Pipe.

Pipe, who held a gun trained on her heart. His smile burned her with its utter coldness. “*Querida*. Let’s call him together, shall we?”

\* \* \*

“I still can’t believe you scored an actual invitation to this thing.”

Chandler grinned slyly at Axel Moreno, who had forgone his fake cleric’s robes tonight in favor of combat boots, forest-green fatigue pants and a black T-shirt. “You sound suitably impressed. I like you.”

The DEA agent shook his head as he continued his methodical reassembling of the two handguns he’d just cleaned and prepped. “Just didn’t realize MI6 had those kind of underworld hookups.”

“MI6 doesn’t. I do.” Chandler’s blond ponytail swung as she whipped around to glare at Tobias. “Why are you coughing at me?”

“Are you really going to call hunting down the new *de facto* leader of a Russian black-market arms ring and threatening to break all the fingers in his right hand unless he handed over the code word to get us into the auction a ‘hookup’?” Tobias fixed her with a wry look. “I ask only for my own edification.”

“You and your big words, Cheekbones.”

Tobias chuckled and playfully tugged the ends of her hair, and at any other time, Casey would’ve watched this byplay between the pair with bemusement. Right now, gathered in the basement of Our Lady of the Bleeding Heart with only an hour before Adam’s auction was to start, Casey could only pace. “Either way, we have our in.” His hand hovered over the chain around his neck, not quite touching the rounded metal links.

“Chandler goes in as a representative of *Polnoch*’ *Pulya*, uses the password Ivashov gave her and outbids everyone else there.”

“Okumura’s keeping the plane ready for us, but we still need to divert as much attention away from our route to the airfield as possible,” Vick was saying, one fingertip tracing the line of a road on their laminated regional map spread out on the table. “Division of assets. Who’s willing to stay behind as a diversionary tactic?”

“No need for that.” Axel finished strapping one gun to his ankle, the other to his hip. “Put me in an SUV big enough to feasibly hold all of you, and I’ll drive like a bat out of hell away from the club toward Cordova International to the south.”

Vick nodded. “That’s one. Who’s our second?”

Casey was relieved to have Vick here. He had no problem letting the Brit take point on this, especially as he recognized his own emotional vulnerability in this mission. His wife, his daughter, his kid brother—all at risk at the hands of a criminal who’d tried to claim ownership of each of them in some manner. “Finn or Henry,” Casey said, volunteering his seconds in command, both of whom stood across the table from him.

Finn shrugged, brawny shoulders strapped with a dual holster as he adjusted the utility belt around his hips. “Henry’s a better driver than I am, plus I’m medical. Pretty much irreplaceable, amirite?”

His partner scowled at him. “Thanks a bunch, pal.” The former Air Force lieutenant glanced to the map. “Fine. Put me in another truck. I’ll go northwest.”

“So long as you steer clear of the hacienda to the northeast, we’re golden.” Casey looked around the table, taking in those he trusted, those who’d come to Colombia with no questions asked in order to help him. A small team, but for all that they were taking three vulnerable souls out of the country—four if the nanny joined them—a small team was all they needed.

They were Faradays, after all.

“Vick and I will go in with Chandler, as her personal security.” Tobias adjusted his necktie, not a coiffed hair out of place. “As soon as we’ve confirmed that Adam’s ours outright, Casey and Finn will go to the hacienda and collect Ilda and Arlo.”

Nodding, Casey began to pack the pockets of his cargos with his usual necessities—a pair of knives, garrote wire, a utility tool, extra clips for his 9mm, fishing line, fresh gauze and a rolled bandage, antiseptic wipes, a clean bandana. His satellite phone was charging off to the side, the GPS tracker already turned on and speaking to Della, who monitored their movements and was listening in with Beth and Gavin, neither of whom made the trip—Gavin because he was too injured to be of any use, and Beth because, well, she was determined to remain out of the life. Not that Casey

blamed her; after a decade as an assassin, starting in her teens, she deserved the somewhat normal life she'd worked so hard to hold onto. Not to mention, it was obvious that Vick wanted her nowhere near the action, at not quite two months out from Beth's run-in with a rogue MI6 torturer.

Earlier in the day, Casey had parked a vehicle near the hacienda, hidden by the trees. As soon as he and Finn dealt with the security left behind, they'd grab the girls and head down the ravine to where the Land Rover waited. They'd then head to the remote airstrip to the west—little more than a cow pasture—meet up with Vick, Chandler, Tobias and a paid-for Adam, and Captain Okumura would fly them to Chicago.

It was a good plan. Simple but effective, and involving minimal human casualties. Pipe had killed dozens of innocents last night using Faraday weapons and critically injured over a hundred more, if the hospital intake logs were to be believed. Casey couldn't countenance any more senseless violence, not if he could help it. That meant incapacitating any brigadiers left on the hacienda, keeping as many of the auction-goers alive as possible, despite their obvious criminality.

The only dead man tonight was going to be Pipe.

Casey honestly couldn't say he was happy about that, either, except it was necessary, to keep Ilda and Arlo safe. Who was to say Pipe wouldn't chase them down, as soon as he knew where to look? Or as soon as someone *told him* where to look. There was still a mole in the Faraday organization. Until that mole was dealt with, none other than this core team could know about Casey's new, precious family.

He'd be doing the world a favor by taking out Pipe—one less drug lord for the DEA and Interpol to spend millions of dollars fighting each year. But the Faradays weren't judge and jury, and assassinating such a prominent figure in such a public setting didn't sit well on Casey's conscience.

Tobias's quiet killing of Kedrov, already a dead man in the eyes of the world at large, was one thing. There was a line in the sand that his family still had yet to cross. If Pipe died tonight at Faraday hands, that line would cease to exist, and it would be up to Casey and his siblings to find it—redraw it—when they regrouped. If such a line could even *be* redrawn.

“Let's talk the La Jaula floor plan.” Grabbing the sketch of the club he'd done yesterday afternoon, before the supper from hell, Casey placed it in



front of Vick and Chandler. “They’ll most likely be keeping Adam backstage—”

His phone rang.

Everyone around the table paused what they were doing. Those in Chicago had agreed no calls until the op was over, and those here had turned their cells off upon arrival at Our Lady, knowing there was a chance—however slight—that the snitch inside Faraday Industries could have cloned their devices and be listening in. Casey’s sat phone was the only phone in play, and the only person who could possibly be calling was Ilda.

Stomach sinking, he unplugged the mobile and answered. “Hello?”

“Casí?” Ilda’s low murmur was brittle, harsh. “Are you...are you alone?”

Casey moved to the edge of the room. “Yes. What’s wrong, *amor*?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.” A beat passed on the other end of the call. “Where are you?”

Something in her husky voice set his every nerve ending on fire. Holding up a finger to keep his people at bay, knowing those who understood Spanish were listening intently to his side of the conversation, he blew out a tense breath. “Nowhere important.” He fought to keep his sudden wariness from seeping into his tone. “Are you on your way to the charity auction?”

“No. I... I’m going to the club tonight. With Pipe. He’s asked me to sing.” She exhaled slowly. “Please tell me you’ll be there.”

“Ilda—”

“I need you to be there, Casí.” Her swallow was audible. “I need you to promise to be at the club. Manuel will let you in the front door, but you have to be there in an hour.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Casey scrubbed a hand over his buzzed scalp before finally gripping the chain around his neck, lying beneath the collar of his T-shirt. His fist closed around the set of dog tags bearing only his blood type and an untraceable phone number...and the delicate moonstone ring he wanted to slide back on his wife’s finger at the earliest opportunity. “You know I wouldn’t miss your singing.”

Nothing but dead air. She’d hung up without another word.

Slowly, Casey lowered the phone, turning to face the table of grim faces once more. The first pair of eyes he met were Chandler’s, a bright, clear brown several shades lighter than Ilda’s, but in them he found a steady reassurance that both surprised and gratified him. “Change of plans.”

Straightening his shoulders, he stalked to the table and flattened both hands atop the scattered maps. “Looks like I’m going to the auction with you.”

\* \* \*

Ilda settled her mobile into Pipe’s outstretched hand, unable to look away from the muzzle of his gun.

“You’re displeased with me.”

Her stomach clenched. “Displeased doesn’t begin to touch my feelings, Felipe.” Swallowing around the knot lodged in her throat, she forced her gaze to his, searching the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses for some sign of reaction, some hint of emotion. “How many people did you kill last night?”

Pipe shrugged. “As many as were necessary to deliver my message.”

“What message?”

“That Medellín belongs to me.” His tone remained unaffected, smooth and calm with his arrogant pronouncement. “That *Colombia* belongs to me.”

“And what are you going to do with Colombia, now that it’s yours?” She heard the bitterness in her voice but was unable to hide it, though she sensed Pipe looking at her as never before. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” Shoving her shaking hands into her pockets, she made an effort to forget that he held a gun on her. This man whom she had slept with. This man who had helped her raise her daughter. “Why do you want Casí at the club tonight?”

“Casey.” When she said nothing—apparently what he expected of her—his mouth twisted in a cruel imitation of a smile. “*Cay-zee*. Casey Faraday.” He considered her as panic stole her breath. “You know who he is.”

Ilda bit her tongue to keep from saying a word.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t believe you knew who your lover was four years ago.” Pipe’s voice had lost some of its calm. “Just as I don’t believe you knew his true identity when he came back from the dead. I certainly didn’t.” He exhaled on a heavy sigh. “I would never have put it together myself, the connection between Arlo and the Faradays, without their youngest in my custody.”

All pretense was gone, apparently, and rash anger filled her as she acknowledged that she had likely just drawn Casey straight into a trap of Pipe's making. "You took his brother."

"Does it help my cause if I tell you it wasn't my choice to take him? Merely the price of doing business."

"What *cause* are you referring to?"

"You and Arlo. My family for the last four years is my cause. But you think I'm a monster now, regardless, don't you?" He shook his head. "Did you know, it was Manuel who told me about your liaison with Casímiro Cortez years ago—not Théa? And, at the time, I told him... I told him to take care of it."

Dread trickled with cold intent into her bloodstream. "What does that mean?"

"It means precisely what you think it means. You're not slow, Ilda. One of my boys had no business messing around with a woman under my protection, and Cortez—Faraday—knew better. If he hadn't presumably died during the incident with Orras four years ago, he'd have been gone soon after. So what was he—DEA? CIA?"

Ilda simply stared at him.

Finally losing patience, he gestured toward the house with his gun, smiling grimly when she flinched. "Inside, now. We're going to be late unless we get you dressed."

"I can dress myself." The inside of her lip split between her teeth, nails biting into her palms as she turned slowly on her heel to cross the courtyard. Fading sunlight blinded her momentarily as dusk stole over the hills.

"Oh, *querida*." Something cold nudged her between the shoulder blades. *Gun*. "Like I'm going to let you out of my sight *ever* again."

## Chapter Eighteen

Polite applause spread throughout the audience as Ilda lowered the microphone. Her fingers hurt, she gripped it so tightly, and her cheeks ached with the strain of holding a performance smile. The last thing she wanted was to smile out at a room full of people desperate to *buy* another human being for nefarious purposes.

The only thing keeping her sane was the knowledge that Casey was here, somewhere. And not only Casey, but his team. It wasn't all villains listening to her sing a pared-down cover of a Billy Joel tune—she'd felt sassy and subversive tonight, wanting to give a nod to the Americans who were half her daughter's heritage.

In her mind, it was a *fuck you* to the man who climbed the stage next to her, taking the mic from her. His fingers curled around her forearm, and she fought not to stiffen, up there under the lights with all eyes trained her direction. Pipe's grip remained gentle, for all that it was unyielding. Lifting the microphone, he spoke to their audience. "The songbird of Medellín, Ilda Almeida. Another round of applause for her brilliant talent, please."

The crowd obliged, slightly more enthusiastic now that the main event had apparently begun.

Overhead, the lights focused on the stage changed in brilliance, brightening from the amber glow of a single spotlight to a track of multiple spots encompassing the entire stage. As Ilda blinked, individual faces took shape, and she desperately scanned the attendees for the one familiar visage she needed to see.

Dear God, there were so many people here, perhaps more than her inherent faith in the goodness of humanity could endure. The smaller tables on the floor had been filled, each seat taken. The booths along the back wall held the larger groups, several of whom were visibly armed with sinister-looking guns half Ilda's size.

She shivered as a wave of air-conditioning blasted the skin bared by her royal-blue satin dress, the gown she always wore when she needed to be her most brave while performing. Ilda had never suffered from stage fright, not

until Théa died. Not having her sister on stage with her, leading her with the intricate magic Théa's agile fingers worked on the guitar, had left Ilda feeling vulnerable. So when she'd first told Pipe she was ready to sing again two years ago, and he had purchased and outfitted this club especially for her, she had told herself the gowns were armor, that wearing a pretty dress that was so not her natural inclination but instead an echo of Théa's exquisite tastes was almost the same as having Théa on the stage with her. And especially when she wore this gown in Théa's favorite shade of blue, it was as though Ilda weren't alone.

Tonight, she needed to not be alone, but it had nothing to do with the music.

*There.* Her pulse thudded in her throat as she finally laid eyes on Casey, tucked away in the shadows near the entrance. He hadn't bothered to dress up, sticking to his typical T-shirt, utility trousers and boots. His body was his weapon, but she had no doubt he was carrying, and seeing him standing there, staring straight back at her with all the dark confidence in the world, loosened a few of the knots inside her.

He was here, and everything would be all right. Just as she knew that, no matter what happened to her, he would get Arlo out of Medellín. Funny how in a mere matter of days she'd done the impossible—placed her complete and utter trust in a man she hardly knew. But of one thing she was certain: Casey would never stop fighting for them. All three of them.

"Welcome, my friends." Pipe's smile was cold, his amplified voice laced with the slick charm of a successful businessman. This time, his words were in English. "This is quite the turn-out for our little event, is it not?"

The attendees murmured in cautious agreement.

"Which means we must all be on our best behavior tonight." Her ex-fiancé's smile widened. "In the spirit of transparency, I'd like to alert you to just whom you're bidding against." Without releasing her arm, he shifted to stage right, nodding at the first table. "Several countries are represented this evening, including Russia—" another nod to the next table "—Syria—" and the next "—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, the Congo..." Pipe lifted his chin toward the rear of the floor tables. "Mexico and Nicaragua and Venezuela, Israel and Italy, Ireland, England, Canada, and, interestingly, the United States of America." He shot Ilda a

sideways glance, as though she were his co-conspirator in this madness. “What a diverse showing, wouldn’t you say, *querida*?”

Ilda could do nothing but nod mutely, keeping her expression blank. Even a fake smile no longer felt feasible.

His hand, too warm now against her skin, slid from her forearm to her elbow, but his words were for his guests. “I won’t keep you in suspense any longer. We all know what—who—you are here for. A prize that is truly beyond price for the power and access it—*he*—will grant you.” With the hand holding the microphone, he pointed to the sound booth located next to the long bar.

A faint whirring came from behind Ilda, and she turned to see a projection screen being lowered over the black curtains at the rear of the stage. A second later, live streaming images appeared...of Adam Faraday.

Adam, shrouded in darkness, with no obvious markers to indicate his surroundings. But there was a shadow falling over his bruised face, a straight slash of glowing light, and Ilda suddenly knew where he was.

In the prison cell of a stall, in the stable on the hacienda. Which meant...which meant he wasn’t *here*.

Oh. Oh, no.

Unable to help herself, Ilda whipped around to meet Casey’s troubled gaze, barely hearing Pipe’s smug tone as he spoke into the mic. “...can’t believe I’d be foolish enough to bring such a valuable product here, can you? While we are attempting to behave, of course, we must admit that, as a whole, men and women of in our line of work are hardly known for our...honesty.” Pipe paused. “Though honor is another matter entirely.”

Whatever it was Casey and his team had planned for Adam’s rescue, Ilda knew it had been dependent upon the young man being here, in La Jaula. In fact, she’d bet a number of the attendees had intended a similar grab-and-go, thwarted now by Pipe’s clever strategy. The only reason Ilda recognized Adam’s location—inside that decrepit box stall—was because she had stood in its doorway a few short days ago. No matter the pains Pipe had taken to obscure any identifiers, Ilda knew—and Casey did, too.

*That* was why Pipe had forced her at gunpoint to get him to the club, no doubt knowing that Casey and his people would have planned some brilliant rescue, snatching Adam from the auction.

But Ilda understood Pipe as few others did, and this was all arrogance, all showmanship. He was rubbing it in Casey's face, puppet strings in one hand and a pair of sharp shears in the other. The subtext was all too clear.

*Your brother or your woman. Choose, motherfucker.*

Go, she mouthed to Casey, first in Spanish, then English. *Go now.*

The darkness of the club couldn't conceal the heat in his eyes, but Casey did what she said, nodded and pushed through the front door, disappearing into the night.

A moment later, another shadow moved, following him out the door. Manuel.

Ilda's worried gasp caught the attention of the man at her side, Pipe shifting to stare down at her, his gaze narrowed threateningly. Fingertips digging into her elbow to the point of pain, he lifted the microphone. "Tonight's item is Adam Ibrahim Faraday, youngest son of Frank Faraday, CEO of Faraday Industries. As you can see from the live feed, he is in perfect health, minus a few bumps and bruises." Pipe glanced behind them at the feed, where Adam blinked in a silent scowl at whomever held the camera, his handsome face no less striking for being smudged with dirt. "The bidding will begin at two hundred and fifty million American dollars."

Ireland raised his hand.

"Two hundred and seventy-five," shouted Nigeria.

Saudi Arabia came in with two-eighty, the bidding continuing in English colored with a world's worth of accents as the amount left the threes and fours in the dust to enter half a billion dollars.

That particular bid came from a compact blonde lounging at a table nestled in shadow to the right of the stage. "Five hundred," she offered calmly, one leg crossed over the other, a hand toying with the glass tumbler filled with amber liquid on the tabletop. A bearded man in a black-leather bomber jacket sat across from her, but it was the tall, lean man in an immaculate three-piece suit who stood behind her that held Ilda's attention, his dark hair neatly combed and, oddly, aviator sunglasses shielding his eyes. Mouth a hard line, the suited man's head didn't turn from side to side as with many of the other bodyguards in the room; instead, he stared straight at the screen bearing Adam's feed. But Ilda didn't make the mistake of believing he wasn't fully aware of every other individual in the room, including her.

As the bidding continued, voices raising as the number approached the seven hundreds, Ilda watched the man in the suit, unable to tear her gaze from him. He seemed...like someone she should know. Maybe it was the way he stood, or the focus he paid to the live stream, but when Ilda allowed herself to worry—just for a split second—about Casey being followed from the club by Manuel, it clicked into place.

*Faraday.* The man in the suit was a Faraday, and Ilda would bet that those sunglasses were in place to hide a too-familiar set of eyes. Suspicion fully aroused, she took in the line of his sharp jaw, the shape of his ears, his darker coloring, and she knew that, should he step into the light, she'd see Arlo reflected back. Judging by his stance at the blonde bidder's shoulder, she was with them, too.

Ilda fought to contain her shuddering sigh of relief. She didn't need to know the details of their plan to understand that she hadn't been left to stumble through this nightmare alone.

And, God, it was a nightmare that kept escalating in horror.

"Eight-eighty," shouted someone from one of the booths. The speaker rose to stand in front of his table, an older man who was small in stature, for all his voice carried easily to the stage. "You would be wise, Pipe, not to permit this farce to continue any longer."

Murmurs flew across the room as bidders turned to stare at the man. A few chairs scraped, various bodyguards tensing with their hands on their firearms. One of Pipe's brigadiers, Juan David Guzman, shifted toward the stage, a gun in his hand.

Pipe frowned at the speaker, squinting past the bright lights before his teeth clenched—apparently, in recognition. "Eight hundred and eighty million dollars is hardly a farce."

The man began to move toward the stage, sidling between the scattered tables. "But this auction is. You are selling that which does not belong to you."

The closer he came, the stiffer Pipe grew beside Ilda, until his grip on her arm made her wince. "Your boss reneged. Therefore, Faraday is mine to do with as I please."

"Don't be stupid, Pipe." The man stopped in the middle of the floor, some ten feet from the stage's edge. "You should have held to our bargain.



You should have been *patient*.” Then he said something in a language Ilda didn’t recognize, and a third of the room stopped breathing.

Dread, nauseating and heavy, coiled low in her stomach. Yanking at her arm, she attempted to pull it from Pipe’s grasp. “Please,” she whispered, gaze flitting between the older man and Pipe’s unforgiving profile. “Please, let go.” Suddenly wild with choking panic, she tugged harder, twisting until she felt a wrenching pain streak up to her shoulder. Her eyes flicked to the Faraday and the blonde, both of whom now stood at the ready, arms loose at their sides.

In her peripheral vision, Guzman moved again, gun hand lifting. But he wasn’t looking at the older man. No, he was looking at Pipe, and Ilda.

“Bargains, contracts—we do not leave paper trails. We only have our honor. The understanding between your organization and mine, it was based on honor and a mutual understanding.” Finally, Pipe released her, but only to step closer to the lip of the stage, staring down the impertinent bidder. “We are not men of patience, *amigo*, but of action. Show me action, and I will quit the auction this minute.”

The man sighed, shaking his graying head in disappointment. “You should know better than to make such a demand, boy.” Moving so fast Ilda barely had time to process what she was seeing, the man magicked a gun into his hand from somewhere and aimed it.

He aimed it at *her*.

A shot rang out, and she screamed, frozen in place and waiting for the pain to come.

It never did.

With a shout, Pipe threw his body in front of hers, jerking unnaturally as hell broke loose in the club. One second, one minuscule second and a bullet meant for Ilda, was all it took to stop the heart of the man who had been family, friend and lover to her. One bullet, and the monster who had terrified her was dead.

The life was already gone from his eyes when he hit the stage, blood seeping across the pristine white of his shirt. Lodged fatally in his chest was the intended end of her existence, a sacrifice Ilda would never have thought he would make. Except he did. He had.

Pipe had died to save her.

Awareness of her surroundings came back to her in a rush. Her ears rang, just as they had in the dining room the night before, and she gasped as she realized the club had erupted in chaos. Tables were overturned, bidders brawling, gunshots peppering the yelling in so many languages she couldn't begin to follow. Guzman was nowhere to be seen. She stumbled backward, toward the black curtains and the projection screen and the dressing room entrance she knew lay just beyond, but her gaze caught on the Faraday, whose shades had been tossed aside.

He looked directly at her. "Get out of here!" Pointing toward the rear exit onto the alley, he shouted, "Go, Ilda, now!"

Her name. He knew her name. But of course he knew her name. Just as he no doubt knew who she was to Casey, and who Casey was to—"Arlo." Fisting the heavy skirt of her gown in both hands, she kicked off her stilettos and dashed down the steps of the stage, ducking and shrieking when a shot ricocheted overhead. Her sore shoulder slammed into the back door, her balance faltering as she tumbled over the concrete step into the darkened alley.

The overhead lamp, usually motion sensitive, remained unlit, and Ilda halted, gasping, her senses on fire. Bad. This was bad, bad bad bad. Throwing herself against the brick wall behind an overflowing dumpster, she clung to the shadows and blinked, forcing her eyes to adjust to the blackness of the abandoned alley. The dress slithered around her legs as she fumbled beneath one side of the skirt, too long now that she was barefoot, but she couldn't afford to hold it off the ground. No, she needed her shaking hands free...for the gun Casey had given her.

Footsteps sounded inside the club, a pounding gait rapidly approaching the back entrance, and Ilda held her breath as the door flung open. A man she didn't recognize, his skin pale even in the unrelenting darkness, surveyed the alley, obviously looking for something. Someone.

Those searching eyes landed on the dumpster, and her vision must have adjusted because she saw him grin. Oh, fuck. He was looking for *her*.

"I see you," he said in rasping English, advancing on her hiding spot with slow steps. "I see you dressed in blue."

Ilda shrank back against the wall, her thumb falling to the gun's safety mechanism.

Clucking his tongue, he stalked closer, leering smile never fading. “Bet I can make you sing just as pretty as you did in there.” One of his hands went to the buttons of his jacket, and he stopped then, only the corner of the filthy dumpster separating them now. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she straightened her arms and fired.

And missed.

He laughed, an ugly sound full of menacing amusement. “Oh, this is *perfect*—”

Without warning, two shots rang out, echoing in the high-walled alley. The villain twitched and grunted, then fell gracelessly into an unmoving heap in a dirty puddle.

Gun held in her white-knuckled grasp, Ilda peeked around the edge of the dumpster to peer toward the mouth of the alley. There, jogging toward her, was the blonde, pistol gripped in one hand as though it were an extension of the woman’s limb. “Ilda Almeida? I’m a friend of Casey’s.” The woman’s Spanish was more than passable, though tinged with her native accent. “Are you all right?”

“I am.” Stepping out from her hiding place, Ilda hurriedly skirted her dead assailant before holding out the gun—safety re-engaged—to her petite rescuer. “Please take this before I accidentally shoot you. Or myself.” She felt numb to the violence she’d witnessed, her mind shuttered against the truth of her surroundings. Of Pipe’s sacrifice. “Your name is...”

“Chandler McCallister. MI6—British intelligence.” The blonde slipped Ilda’s gun into the back waistband of her black pants. “If you’re ready to move, there’s a car down the block that will take us out of the city to our plane.”

“My daughter—”

“Oh, I know. Arlo, yeah?” Chandler’s mouth curved in a deadly smile then, and held out her hand to Ilda, her own gun still ready in the other.

“Don’t fret. We’ve got it sorted. So let’s get you to your girl.”

## Chapter Nineteen

“You should know better than to threaten a bad man’s wife.”

Casey...he *was* a bad man. But he was a bad man for good reason. He swung the machete.

Manuel’s lifeless body collapsed to the street in a cloud of dust as Casey drew his phone from his pocket, the machete dripping at his side. He couldn’t go back inside the club for Ilda, not with both Adam and Arlo in danger at the hacienda.

Threat to Ilda’s life. Assailant/s unknown.

With that text sent to Tobias inside La Jaula, trusting his brother to take care of his wife, Casey sprinted to where Finn waited in an unmarked Jeep a few blocks away. Yanking open the passenger door, he tossed the bloody machete in the backseat. “Drive.”

Finn drove, breaking speed laws left and right as he hurried them to the city limits and toward the hacienda up in the hills. “I didn’t get everything through the comm, but I take it Adam wasn’t inside?”

“No. They kept him offsite.”

“Smart.”

Casey’s jaw clenched. “Very. The good thing is, I know exactly where he is.”

The remainder of the drive—too slow by far—passed mostly in silence, with only the occasional murmur to interrupt. He felt torn in two—no, in *three*—leaving Ilda behind when he knew someone was out to kill her. Not Manuel, because Manuel was no longer breathing, but there was every chance he’d sent another to do his bidding. While Pipe might hurt her, punish her, Casey had to hope that the drug lord would never kill her, despite being aware of her liaison with Casey.

Casey had studied his rival’s face. He knew love when he saw it, no matter how warped it might be.

But Arlo was at the hacienda, and Adam in the stables, and thank God he had Finn with him because Casey wasn't a superhero. He couldn't be in multiple places at once. With Pipe changing the stakes and keeping Adam away from the auction, Casey and his team were now forced to improvise. "Hold up," he said as they approached the front gates, leaning forward in his seat. "Shit."

Finn echoed the curse as he slowed the Jeep, both of them eyeing the wide-open metal chain link. A trio of bodies were slumped by the guard post, lit only by the Jeep's headlights, as the overhead bulb had been obviously tampered with.

Someone had beaten them to the hacienda.

"Drive." Casey's gut knotted as Finn hit the gas up the long drive, killing the headlights as they approached the house. Guns already in hand, they exited the Jeep prior to reaching the southern courtyard. Casey touched his comm, which would feed to not only Finn on the other side of the vehicle, but to the rest of the team back in the city, Okumura at the airfield and Della home in Chicago. "Guys, we have a problem," he murmured.

"Go for Vick."

"Busted front gate, dead brigadiers. The hacienda's been breached." He paused, glancing around the dark, empty courtyard. "Status report from the club?"

"Shooting broke out, and Pipe's dead." Vick's voice was grim, British vowels clipped as it became apparent he was on the move. "Chandler has Ilda secured."

There wasn't time for Casey to experience any relief. "Finn and I need backup. You, Henry, and Moreno get your asses to the hacienda as fast as you can."

"On it. Let you know when we're there."

Then Casey was moving, quickly and silently, Finn at his six as they clung to the shade trees bordering the edges of the courtyard. A dark lump lay still on the cobblestones, Pipe's colors evident around the arm of the dead brigadier, and Casey looked up to the nearest security camera.

No blinking red light. The system had been tampered with.

"Clear the house," he whispered to Finn. "Start downstairs and work up. Nursery is the second level, second door."

With a nod, Finn entered the hacienda, and Casey headed through the open-air portico dividing the two courtyards. No moon shone tonight, cloud cover thick in the night sky, but his eyes had adjusted without trouble. He didn't risk pulling the penlight from his pocket and alerting whoever had taken out the brigadiers to his presence.

In the back of his mind, he knew there was a possibility that Adam wouldn't be there, but that would mean Casey had failed. Casey *couldn't* fail, not in this. This was his family being targeted, continuously and from every quarter, or so it appeared. He had no business holding the position he did, doing the work he traveled the world to do, if he could barely protect his own family at home.

Adam should never have been taken in the first place. This week down in Colombia, the days bleeding and blurring together in a rollercoaster rush, had prevented Casey from hunting down who was responsible for leaving his siblings vulnerable. But as soon as he was out of here—as soon as Adam was safe, and Arlo and Ilda settled—nothing would stop him from turning the tables on their enemies and running them to ground. Nothing.

The windows of the barracks were dark, the door wide open, another body fallen haphazardly across the threshold. Casey guessed that Pipe had left a dozen or so brigadiers behind, but already there were five down, probably more inside the house itself. Whoever had taken down the guards had done so efficiently, probably with silenced pistols, sneaking up on the brigadiers unawares. A tac team of at least three, if Casey had been the one in charge, which meant he and Finn were likely outnumbered, and by professionals.

He spoke into the comm. "Vick?"

"Yeah."

"You said there was shooting at the club. Who started it?"

"Older man, affiliation unknown. It sounded like perhaps he was the one who'd initially made the deal with Pipe for Adam, or at least worked for the dealmaker."

"Nationality?"

"Couldn't tell you, but his accent indicated he's spent a great deal of time in England. When we're home, I'll have Della pull the audio from our comms and—"

“Already on it, handsome,” Della’s voice crackled in their ears as she finished Vick’s thought. “Running a voice analysis now.”

“Thanks, cuz.” Making a judgment call, Casey left the barracks uninvestigated and crossed the courtyard, keeping low to the ground as he headed toward the stables. “Finn, I think—” The toe of his boot brushed something. Something with mass. Something that whimpered.

Kneeling, Casey ran his hand across the heaving side of Pipe’s faithful old terrier mutt, fingers coming away sticky with blood. “Shh, boy. It’s okay,” he whispered, stroking soothing fingers over one soft, floppy ear. Cerdito struggled to rise, and again Casey shushed him, taking in the agitation of the horses in their stalls, the Dutch doors open on the top to let the beasts look into the courtyard. Something was happening inside the stables.

Casey left him where he was and crept toward the main door to the stables, hanging open on its hinges. Faint light emanated from within, and, gun in hand, Casey edged inside, avoiding the wide aisle as he crouched down, leaning against the wooden side of one of the box stalls.

Voices sounded, indistinguishable and hushed, from the end of the aisle that led toward the leg of the barn housing Adam’s cell. On quiet feet, Casey rounded the edge of the stall—

And saw Isobel sprawled in the middle of the aisle, a hole in her forehead and one hand clutched around the strap of a child’s bright-orange backpack.

No. Fear unlike any Casey had ever before experienced swept through him, a hurricane of terror and panic and blinding, sickening rage. Arlo. If Isobel didn’t have Arlo... “Finn,” he hissed, words choked by his pounding pulse, and he crept past Isobel’s body toward the end of the barn. “Go to the nursery. Look in places a scared three-year-old might hide.”

“Your girl’s missing?”

“The nanny’s been killed. And remember that Arlo won’t hear you coming, or calling, so be thorough in your search.”

“Copy that, boss.”

*Please*, Casey thought. Begged. Prayed. *Please let my daughter be okay.* For the first time in memory, his palms were slick around the grip of his 9mm, his fingers trembling. His jaw ached, his chest shuddered and the nausea in his stomach refused to fade. There was a clamoring in his temples that echoed in his ears.

Arlo. Arlo, Arlo, Arlo. *Arlo.*

Breathing deep, trying to reclaim some semblance of calm because he would be no good to anyone, least of all her, if he didn't have his head on straight in the next three seconds. With one last exhalation, he hustled down the aisle to the tack room, peering around the corner.

One man stood outside Adam's cell, assault rifle with a silencer pointed into the stall, lock broken and door open. A scuffle sounded within, a fist connecting with flesh followed by a pained grunt, and then the man with the rifle spoke in fluid, fluent Arabic.

"No. The boss wants him unharmed. Not a scratch, he said."

From inside the stall, someone spoke, too low for Casey to hear, but it was obvious the man with the rifle was in charge. "Take her from him, then."

*Her.* Oh, hell no. Bile rising, Casey stepped into the hall, gun raised in both hands. He strode forward on silent feet, clinging to the wall, until he stood directly beside the man with the rifle. Without a word, he lifted the muzzle of his gun and pressed it to the man's temple.

The man with the rifle froze before shifting slightly, pale green eyes locking with Casey's. "You don't want to do that, friend," he said in Spanish.

Which meant Casey held the upper hand, for now. "Doubtful. Get your men out of the stall, or I put a bullet in your brain."

The green-eyed leader seemed to consider this, then bit out a command. Just as Casey suspected, two soldiers dressed head to toe in black exited the stall, though he noted they didn't lower their weapons, silenced assault rifles like their commander's. One aimed directly at Casey, while the other...

Casey swallowed, hard.

The other had his rifle trained not on an unchained Adam, who moved to stand in the open stall doorway, but on Arlo, whose tear-streaked face was pressed cheek-to-cheek with his kid brother's. Adam held her tightly in both arms, protectively, upper body turned to put himself between Arlo and the gunmen as much as possible. "Nice timing," Adam murmured in Spanish, quick enough to have picked up on Casey's deliberate mislead, using the commander's ignorance against him.

"I try." Casey's panicked gaze swept over Arlo, searching for injury. "Is she hurt?"



“Nah, just shaken up.” One of Adam’s hands was threaded through Arlo’s ponytail, his palm cupped over the back of her head, fingertips moving in a soothing massage against the girl’s scalp. “She slipped through the slats a few seconds before these goons showed up.”

Probably after witnessing Isobel getting gunned down. Casey clamped down on the rage boiling in his chest and directed his next comment to the commander. “Let them go.”

The man’s lip curled derisively. “That’s not how this works. Even if you shoot me, my men will shoot you *and* the little one. This man—” he indicated Adam “—is already weakened from his imprisonment and is no match for two highly trained soldiers. He is coming with us.”

“No.” The knot in Casey’s gut twisted, mind racing through the possibilities and coming back to the same conclusion, again and again.

“Yes.” Now the commander smiled outright, cold and calculating. “And you know it. I die, you die, *she* dies...and she’s who you’re truly scared for in this scenario, isn’t she?” As if he wasn’t the least nervous about the pistol Casey held on him, the commander turned to face him completely, the muzzle of the gun coming to rest between his brows. “A deal, then. Her for him.”

“Done.”

Casey growled at Adam’s immediate assent. “Wait a second.”

“No.” Adam was already moving forward into the aisle, and the gunmen adjusted their stance accordingly. Stopping when he reached Casey, Adam shifted Arlo in his arms. “Do the math, Case. And then do the fucking math again, because even if the cavalry shows up in the next ten seconds, there’s still a little girl in the middle of a firefight, and these bastards don’t care if she lives or dies.” He glared at the commander before fixing his beseeching stare on Casey once more. “I do. I care. And I won’t have her any more traumatized than she’s already been tonight just because you want to play the hero and save my sorry ass.” Pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head, Adam unwound her clinging monkey arms from around his neck and handed her over to Casey.

Casey, who took her with one hand and kept his gun pointed at the commander’s forehead with the other. “Damn it, Adam.”

“You gotta take care of that pretty baby, bro,” Adam said, a sad smile tugging at his mouth. “Don’t worry. I got this.”

“How touching,” the commander interjected, sarcasm in every syllable, and lifted his chin. Immediately, one of the gunmen grabbed Adam, yanking his arms behind him and securing his wrists with a plastic tie. The other soldier never wavered in his aim, rifle locked onto Casey while the commander spoke. “While I could simply have you shot, you and the girl, I won’t. Because I want you to remember this moment, and that I’m a man of my word. So put your gun down, friend.”

Reluctantly, Casey lowered his weapon, unwilling to holster it completely. “You don’t want to do this,” he warned the commander, echoing the man’s earlier words. A rhythmic thumping noise from outside the stables grew increasingly louder with each passing second.

The commander gave Casey’s response back to him. “Doubtful.” A mocking salute accompanied the retort, and then his brother was being dragged down the hall toward the main aisle, the two soldiers and the commander moving swiftly as Casey trailed slowly behind, completely torn. Adam was right; there was no safety for Arlo, not so long as these men remained armed and present.

Tucking away his gun, Casey activated the comm in his ear, wrapping both arms around Arlo, who appeared to have gone into some sort of shock—no longer crying, no longer moving at all, just shaky little breaths panting out against the side of his neck, and for some reason, that terrified Casey anew. “Finn. *Finn.*”

Gunfire sounded from the courtyard, Finn’s voice crackling in Casey’s ear. “I know. I heard it all, but I’m trapped against the house. They’ve got a chopper and three more guys, one of whom—” More gunfire, and Casey found he couldn’t move. He couldn’t—could *not*—carry Arlo closer to danger. God fucking damn it. “One of whom has a freaking machine gun spraying shells my way, man.”

“Stay down, and don’t shoot.” The words felt torn from him, but the two of them could not take on a six-man ops team, not when it would put both Adam and Arlo at grave risk. “Let them...let them take him.”

Finn cursed a blue streak.

Tucking Arlo’s face into his shoulder, Casey strode into the main aisle of the stables, shielding his daughter from the sight of her dead caregiver. With grim determination, he listened to the thumping blades of the helicopter, the gunfire having ceased, and eased through the door leading into the

courtyard. Just in time to watch the sliding hatch to the enemy chopper slam shut on Adam's bleak expression.

Pain pierced his heart as the helicopter lifted into the air and disappeared all too swiftly into the night sky. Footsteps sounded as Finn dashed across the courtyard to where Casey stood beneath the overhanging stable roof. "Eastern bearing," he said, his voice unrecognizable to his own ears.

"I've already got Della working the satellite feeds." Finn's hand landed on his shoulder, squeezing in reassurance. "We'll find Adam again, don't worry."

But worry was all Casey could do. Without quite realizing what he was doing, he sank to the ground, his back propped against one of the smooth posts reinforcing the hanging roof. "Finn, there's a dog just over there...it was alive when I went into the stable."

"I'll check it out, boss." Finn jogged away to look after Cerdito.

Which left Casey alone with Arlo. Rubbing a hand in what he hoped was a soothing manner over her small back, he stared up at the empty sky. So much darkness, so much death. Not only here, but across the city. Pipe was gone, Medellín's most prominent cartels suffering devastating blows they might not recover from fully.

And Adam. Brave, stupid Adam, who'd protected Arlo better than any of them.

Suddenly, Arlo wriggled in his hold, pushing against Casey's chest and whimpering loudly. He grabbed for her middle, but she wasn't trying to get away. No, she was signing at him, words he didn't understand, and he laid one hand over both of hers, shaking his head. "I don't know," he told her, enunciating carefully in case she was reading his lips. "I don't know what you're saying."

Frowning fiercely at him, she tugged her hands free and pointed to the sky where the helicopter had been. Then she signed again, and this time Casey recognized one of the motions from the night before. The one for *friend*, as Ilda had explained. "Si," he told her, nodding before he mimicked her sign. "That's where he went."

Fresh tears welled, and she sort of...crumpled in his lap, sobbing raggedly as she leaned into his chest. At that moment, Casey felt every bruise, every blow from the past week, his body one giant ache. With a shuddering sigh, he gathered Arlo close and began to sway ever so subtly against the post,

humming tunelessly low in his throat. He rubbed her back and buried his face in her hair, breathing in the scents of barn and dust and kiddie shampoo that clung to her, and he'd never been so bone-shakingly relieved in all his life as he was in this moment.

His daughter. In his arms. Safe from all physical harm. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

Exhaustion swamped him, and he squeezed his eyes shut, listening to Finn speak to someone from a few yards away, either in his comm or on his phone. After a while, Arlo's sobs faded to hiccups, her little body growing heavier against him as her overwhelmed senses got the better of her and she drifted toward unconsciousness. Casey simply held her, content to sit here in the dirt as the night drew in around them.

Eventually, the sound of approaching vehicles in the south courtyard roused him, but he didn't move, able to tell from Finn's relaxed posture that it was their people who'd finally arrived. Car doors slammed, voices raised in worried exclamation, and—

*"Casí?"*

He looked up to see Ilda racing toward him in her blue gown, bare feet flying across the cobblestones, and stood, a sleeping Arlo draped over his chest. "Ilda." Her petite body hit his, frantic hands seeking, clinging to them both.

"You're all right. She's all right?"

"Yes." Wrapping his unencumbered arm around her, he held the two most important people in his universe to him, ignoring the sting of emotion behind his eyes. "Everything's all right now."

A throat cleared to his right. Casey looked up to meet Tobias's somber gaze. "Casey." His brother's voice was so calm, so cool that it hurt. "Where's Adam?"

## *Chapter Twenty*

*One Month Later*  
*Chicago*

So this was what it felt like to live without fear.

Tilting her head back to stare up at the bright blue patch of early summer sky overhead, Ilda adjusted her sunglasses and shifted on the bench. The sound of her daughter's happy laughter hit her ears, a carefree giggling followed by excited canine yipping. Cerdito may still be limping from his brush with danger, but the mutt had relaxed into contentedness alongside Arlo and Ilda in this new city they were exploring together every day.

Chicago was as urban as any other major metropolis, but something in the cool, dry air had infected Ilda with an innate sense of safety. That sense was completely at odds with the logic telling her Chicago carried the same troubles—crime, poverty, overcrowding—as Medellín, but she no longer felt caught in the crosshairs every waking minute, as she had living in Pipe's fortress on the hill.

In the end, it hadn't been much of a fortress, just as the safety she'd craved over the years had been a mirage. But here in America, surrounded by Casey's people and existing amongst friendly Midwesterners, Ilda breathed easy.

There were no Orras threats. No enemies pointing guns at her or her daughter. No guards at the gate or cameras in her home or lies being told so she could keep her conscience clear. The only concern plaguing her was helping Arlo play catch-up after having enrolled her in the Holy Trinity Deaf Program at the Children of Peace Catholic School. The administration had permitted Arlo to join one of the toddler playgroups, despite her being a full year older than the other children, while at the same time offering one-on-one education to get Arlo up to speed with basic signs, with Ilda learning at the same time. They had been lucky that so many of the LSM signs Ilda had co-opted into her and Arlo's private language were synonymous with American Sign Language; Arlo wasn't nearly as behind as Ilda had feared.

Today, Ilda had hooked a leash to Cerdito's collar and popped Arlo into her sleek stroller, and the three of them had left the luxurious townhouse she'd signed a lease for in Benton Place a week after their arrival. The three-level attached home overlooked a small green oasis in the middle of the city, complete with playground and dog-friendly areas, and a sense of seclusion that reinforced Ilda's feeling of security. In the mornings, she would take her two charges downstairs to the park and watch as they played together, no fear weighing her down.

It was glorious. Unexpected and rare. And she knew exactly whom to thank for this immense privilege.

Which was, of course, why she and Arlo and their furry protector had agreed to meet some of the Faraday clan in the Art Institute's North Garden, another verdant paradise tucked away in this concrete jungle. Beth Faraday, Casey's younger sister, worked as an assistant curator at the museum, and in the short weeks that Ilda and Arlo had been in Chicago, they'd shared several midday meals with the stunning young woman, as the Art Institute was only a few blocks from their townhouse. Arlo already adored her sophisticated aunt.

As far as Ilda could tell, the feeling was entirely mutual, though it appeared Beth also had a severe soft spot for the gimpy Cerdito, who Beth insisted on calling "Piglet."

But it wasn't just Beth they'd met for lunch today in the North Garden. Beth's fiancé, the bearded man named Vick who had been party to their rescue in Colombia, held the end of Cerdito's leash as Beth and Arlo focused on integrating a set of plastic lions and tigers—courtesy of a recent trip to Brookfield Zoo—with Arlo's existing stable of dinosaurs. Casey sat cross-legged in the grass, Arlo comfortably in his lap, another of his employees—friends?—lounging on a bench beneath a shade tree, blue gaze watchful whenever he glanced up from the paperback he held between scarred, tattooed fingers.

However, it was the Faraday seated next to Ilda on another bench, some distance from their grassy picnic, who held Ilda's attention. Sofia Abtan Faraday, the family matriarch, had flown in from Boston a mere day after they'd escaped Colombia. Because, as the older woman had explained, "Granddaughters don't grow on trees."

Adam had been right—Arlo had indeed inherited her unusual light-gray eyes from her grandmother. Sofia’s features had softened in her sixth decade, but Beth might as well be a carbon copy, and Ilda could clearly see what Arlo would look like as she grew older—an elegant beauty.

For now, though, Arlo remained Ilda’s innocent little girl, her brush with violence having no obvious lasting effect. There had been no nightmares, and while she had initially signed several questions asking where Pipe was, Arlo appeared to have accepted that he wasn’t *here*, wouldn’t ever be *here*, and while she might not know why, her fast-growing bond with Casey had begun to reverse the paternal deficit.

Casey, who was trying so hard. Casey, who hadn’t let a single day pass without spending time with his daughter, who had attended all of the classes at Children of Peace with Ilda, who had found Cerdito a top-notch veterinarian and installed new locks on all the doors and windows in the townhouse...and, most importantly, had respected Ilda’s quietly voiced wish that he keep his distance from her, Ilda.

The past few weeks had been a lesson in humility, and the cost that fear extracted on one’s life. She’d needed as much emotional and physical distance from Casey as possible—without infringing on his parental rights—in order to come to terms with just how, exactly, she had spent the last four years of her life.

For instance, Ilda had money. *Money* money, more than she’d need in a lifetime, but until Pipe had died and his solicitor had contacted her, Ilda hadn’t realized precisely how much money she had, nor what Pipe had done with it when she’d first been hospitalized after the chapel fire.

He’d invested it—wisely. A significant percentage of the royalties from Almángel’s post-mortem album had been funneled into high-performing funds, all free of the taint of Pipe’s illegal drug trade. He’d also set aside a portion in a trust for Arlo, which included the proceeds from Théa’s estate, and which he also had added to on a quarterly basis with money he earned in legitimate business from the commercial real estate he’d owned in Medellín, Bogotá and Barranquilla.

That money—Ilda’s and Arlo’s—was completely protected from seizure by those who would make claims on his empire, now that he was gone. No international or government agency, nor any rival cartel leader, could touch those investments. For that, Ilda would be forever grateful.

But Pipe had stolen from her, too. He'd hidden her away at the hacienda, limiting her forays into Medellín more than she had realized, having buried her head in the sand with her grief over Théa and Casey and funneling the entirety of her emotional energy into caring for her daughter. He'd kept her dependent on him for every tangible cent. It wasn't until she'd arrived in Chicago, taken a good hard look at her assets and, for the first time, dug deep into the legacy Almángel had left on the music world that Ilda recognized her personal potential hadn't died along with Théa.

She was only thirty-one years old. Her vocal cords worked just fine. A career here in the States, a fresh start, wasn't beyond her power.

For now, though, Ilda wanted nothing more than to bask in this precious safety, and the new freedom she reveled in.

"You're a quiet one, aren't you." Sofia's voice broke into her thoughts.

Ilda straightened on the bench, shifting to look at the woman who would be her mother-in-law, if Casey had his way. "No, actually." She spoke in English, as she had almost exclusively for the past month, a small smile tugging at her mouth. "I am not known for keeping my mouth shut."

"Then it must be me who's bringing down the mood."

Despite the teasing note in Sofia's words, Ilda sensed a question lurking, and knew it was time to come clean about the guilt that had been plaguing her for weeks. "Your son. Adam. He...he saved my daughter."

"Of course he did." Sadness tightened the corners of Sofia's beautiful eyes. "I raised a good man."

Ilda's throat hurt when she swallowed. "But that is the reason he is not here with us today."

"Oh, sweetie, no." For the first time since they'd met, Sofia initiated physical contact with Ilda, one slender arm slipping around Ilda's shoulders and tugging her close. It was maternal and soft and warm and wonderful, and something inside Ilda melted as she leaned into the older woman's embrace. "The reason Adam isn't here is because he made a choice. And he made the *right* choice, to protect our little Arlo above all else." Sofia squeezed Ilda gently, and the melting sensation increased tenfold. "Is this why you've been so careful around me?"

"I am...if I were you—" and it was important that she get her words exactly right "—and my child were somewhere in the world, with someone



who intended him harm, and I could not find him, I would... I would be a mess.” Her throat hurt again, her eyes suddenly damp.

Another squeeze. “You’ve got your one baby, and she’s still a baby. You haven’t gotten to see her grow up yet, into the strong, independent person she’s going to become.” Sofia’s mouth curved, the solemnness leaving her gaze as she smiled at Ilda. “My babies are adults, all of whom have witnessed the scariest the world has to offer—the nature of their work. Yes, I’m terrified for Adam. Yes, I will do anything in my power to get him home again. Yes, I intend to lock him in his childhood bedroom for a year as soon as he *is* home. But I have to trust that my son is smart enough and tough enough and brave enough to handle whatever comes his way. Including this.”

“So you do not resent me?”

“No, Ilda. I like you, quite a lot.” Sofia paused, considering. “But I *do* wish you would put my oldest son out of his misery.”

A fierce blush heated her cheeks. “Oh.”

“Oh.” Sofia’s smile widened. “Casey loves you, and Arlo. It lights him up inside, that love.”

Shoving the sunglasses to the top of her head, Ilda let her gaze wander to the man in question. As if sensing her regard, he glanced up, eyes locking with hers. She shivered in the banked heat she saw there, blasting her with sensual warmth from several yards away. “Will you watch Arlo for us, for a moment?”

Sofia laughed. “Take as long as you need.” With a final squeeze, Casey’s mother stood and walked to Beth, Vick and Arlo, leaning down to murmur something in her son’s ear.

Breathing suddenly became far more difficult.

Short seconds later, Casey stood in front of Ilda, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans, broad shoulders tense as he stared at her. A wealth of emotion lived in those gray-hazel irises, so different than those of the rest of his family, different than Arlo’s, but utterly familiar in the best possible way. “*Hola.*”

He was the only one who’d spoken Spanish with her since leaving Colombia, aside from Chandler McCallister—who, though having returned to London with Tobias, rang Ilda twice a week to check in on how she and Arlo were settling in and adjusting to American life. “*Hola, Casey.*”

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze drank her in, the greed and hunger lashing her. Making her ache. “Would you walk with me, Ilda?” He nodded to indicate the gravel path to her left. “Arlo will be safe—Gavin’s keeping a watchful eye.”

Gavin, the man with the book, the blue eyes and the tattoos. “All right.” Smoothing the skirt of her yellow cotton sundress, Ilda stood and began moving slowly down the path Casey indicated, careful not to touch him. Just as he made an equally concerted effort not to permit his arm to brush hers.

Sculptures rose up on either side, bursting from the trimmed hedges, but she was blind to it. Every sense was attuned to the man at her side. His scent, fresh and masculine, filled her lungs. He filled her peripheral vision, big and bad in the most formal clothes she’d ever seen him wear, perfectly fitted jeans, a heather-gray henley and taupe topsiders. He looked every inch the successful weekendening businessman—which, Ilda had learned, is who he was, when he wasn’t playing spy or soldier.

He looked *edible*, more than anything else, and her mouth watered for a taste. A taste she’d denied herself for weeks because figuring out who she was on her own, without a man casting a shadow over her everyday existence, was a necessary first step for the rest of her life. “Thank you,” she blurted out.

“For what?”

“Giving me the time I asked for.”

His shoulders hiked up, hands turning to obvious fists in his pockets. As though it was as difficult for him to keep from reaching for her as it was for her. “Ask me for anything, Ilda, and I’ll give it. That’s how this works.”

Frowning, she finally looked up at him. “How what works?”

“This. Us.” Casey halted in the middle of the path. “You already know what I want, baby. It hasn’t changed, but... I have.” When she stopped with him, he withdrew his hands, and together they stared down at the long blunt-tipped fingers, the broad palms with their visible calluses. Capable hands that cradled their child so gently, defended them so fiercely and pleased her so thoroughly. “There’s a psychiatrist on staff. We’re required to talk with her on a quarterly basis, and for the past four years, I’ve been lying to her.”

“About what?”

“My mind. When I lost you—when I thought I lost you—I spiraled, big time.” Hesitating, he glanced around, and she saw the soldier in him take hold, assessing their privacy and, apparently, finding it lacking. Gesturing for her to follow him, he led her up a set of stone steps and around a corner, until they stood beneath the old-world arches marking the edge of the museum. His body acted as a shield, barricading them from any prying eyes of the outside world, no matter that it was the middle of the day with sunlight streaming down.

She shifted backward, until her bottom hit the balustrade, her bare shoulders brushing the greenery photosynthesizing its way up the wall. “You don’t have to tell me.” Except she was desperate to know, not because she wanted to revel in his suffering, but because she was finally ready to learn the portions of his past that might hurt *her*.

But he shook his head, the sun glinting off the short dark hair he’d let grow out a bit over the past few weeks. “I’ve got demons, baby. I don’t know if they were always there and I just ignored them, or if they popped up after I thought you’d died, but they fucked me up.” His hands turned to fists at his sides. “Hell, they still fuck me up, even knowing you’re here. So I decided to be honest with the shrink for once during our quarterly a couple weeks ago.” Meeting her eyes, he shifted closer, and a delicious thrill raced through her limbs. “Because I can’t do my job if I’m at the mercy of a chemistry imbalance. Just like I can’t be the best father possible, or the best...the best husband possible.”

Pressure on her chest made it hard to breathe. “It takes a strong man to put his health first.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, as though he wanted to smile but couldn’t bring himself to do so. “Is that another way of calling me selfish?”

Her hands fluttered over her skirt. “Oh, no, I—”

“I’m selfish, Ilda. That’s another thing I’ve learned, talking to the doc.” Again, he inched forward, and she realized that he was maneuvering her. Caging her. “You told me I was back in Medellín, and you’re right.” Another inch, his hands coming to rest on the stone railing, on either side of her hips. “I love you *selfishly*. I love you for making me burn, for making me ache. I love you for how you touch me, and how you let me touch you. I love you for the laughter and excitement and adventure and secrecy of our

courtship, and I love you—” he leaned in until his mouth hovered over hers “—for our daughter. Selfishly is the only way I know how to love you.”

“Casí.” Her palms lifted to rest on the muscled planes of his pectorals. Touching him. She was touching him.

“But the flip side, *amor*, is that I’ll give you anything, everything.” His lips brushed hers in a ghost of a kiss, and it felt good, so damn good. “You and Arlo, you make me selfless. Every piece of me, every inch, belongs to you.” And then he aligned every last one of those inches with all of hers, leaving them both shuddering. “You own me.”

Ilda lost control. Her hands fisted in his shirt, closing the final centimeters between them and stealing the kiss she’d been dying to take for weeks. She licked her way into his mouth, drowning in the rich, familiar taste of his lips. Nothing compared to the sweet need he inspired with each flick of his tongue, nip of his teeth, slide of his lips.

Her arms looped around his neck. “I told you, *marido*. You’re the other half of my soul.”

“*Fénix*.”

“Casí—”

“Sorry, sorry.” He kissed a path across her cheek, hands going to the unconstrained wildness of her curly hair, fisting and tugging to reveal the column of her throat to his lips. “I know you don’t want me to call you that anymore.”

“No, I do. I-I missed it.” Her nails raked over his scalp as she urged him on, lashes fluttering down. “I missed *you*, every day for four years, and I loved you for every one of those days. I loved you for every day we were together in Colombia, and for every night we’ve been apart since landing in Chicago. I love you, *marido*.” Hopping atop the balustrade, she wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling the delightful hard length of his erection nestle into the apex of her thighs. “Being apart feels like a punishment.”

“Then let’s stop punishing ourselves.” Lifting his head, he reached beneath the collar of his shirt to withdraw a chain. “You know our marriage isn’t legal, but I’m your husband. I have been ever since you gave me this.” His palm opened to reveal the moonstone ring she’d placed in his palm four years ago in the chapel—a placeholder for the wedding band she had always intended to purchase for him. “Let me give it back to you now with the promise to do it right this time.” With a yank, the chain released, and he

slid the ring free, shoving the chain into his pocket as he reached for her left hand. “I want us out in the open for everyone to see. Dates, dinners, dancing. I want us to have everything we didn’t the first time around, and do this properly.” Slowly, purposefully, he slipped the ring onto her third finger. “And then, when you’re ready to take on my selfish heart forever, we’ll make it official. How does that sound, *fénix*?”

It sounded just about perfect to her. “Does doing this ‘properly’ involve you touching me?” Her thighs clenched around his hips, and she gifted him with her best seductive smile, relishing the weight of her new-old ring on her finger as she ran her hands over his big shoulders. “I feel like a beggar for you, after so long without.”

“Then it’s a good thing my version of ‘proper’ involves me fucking you senseless whenever you need it, baby.” His cock surged aggressively between them, rough palms falling to her knees and shoving up beneath her sundress. “And I hope you need it bad, because I feel like I’m gonna die if I don’t get inside you.”

She moaned when his tongue found the pulse beneath her ear. “I do. I do need it bad.”

“Good girl. Now spread those pretty legs a little wider for me—Yes, that’s it.” He loosed a pleased growl as he shoved aside the soaked gusset of her panties. “Ah, fuck, baby. Why do you always have to feel like this?” Two masculine fingertips found her clit, petting with quick, sure flicks designed to push her past the edge of reason.

“Fuck me,” she begged, panting. Her sex clamped around nothing, the emptiness leaving her shivering to be filled.

With his non-busy hand anchored now at the base of her spine, he angled her deeper into the green growth at her back, switching up the angle so that his trouser-covered erection rubbed perfectly over her center. He withdrew his hand from between her legs, sucking his fingers deep into his mouth and licking, licking with that devious tongue, before shoving them beneath her skirt and thrusting them into her, deep and without warning.

His mouth caught her scream of pleasure.

And then he was fucking her, with fingers instead of cock, but she was filled and that was enough for now. “Oh, God, Casí.” She kissed him with abandon, growing mindless with each pump of his hand, the grinding of his hips adding perfect pressure until she knew there was no avoiding her

approaching orgasm. Not when she was starved for it. For him. “*Casí, marido.*”

“That’s right, baby. Your man’s gonna make you come.” His whispered words fell harsh against her lips. “Your husband. So go ahead, get my hand all messy. When you’re done, I’m gonna lick you from my skin. Taste you there for hours.”

The heel of his palm raked over her clit, and that was all it took. Whimpering, writhing, she let the stars explode behind her closed eyelids, satiated lust rippling over her exposed skin like a brand she dare not hide, not when she wanted to remain marked by Casey and what he did to her body, her heart, forever.

Then he proceeded to pull his hand free and make good on his threat, licking the evidence of her orgasm from his fingers and sending a whole new round of sticky shivers through her bloodstream. “I think you had better come over for supper this evening.” She met his gaze, smiled at the surprised longing she saw reflected there. “I also think you had better spend the night, too.”

Arms banding about her waist, he dropped his forehead to hers. “*Ilda. Te amo.*”

Of course he loved her, and she loved him. “Come home with us, Casey Faraday.”

“Always.” And he kissed her, stark and pure, and hers. “Always.”

# Epilogue

*Faraday Labs  
San Diego*

Forty-six days. It had been forty-six days since Adam was kidnapped, and it killed Gillian that they hadn't yet rescued him.

It didn't make sense that they couldn't find him. They were Faradays, for Christ's sake; there was *nothing* their family, their company couldn't do. Except, apparently, retrieve one of their own.

Her eyes burned behind the lenses of her glasses, but not from tears or emotion. No, it was from staring at this damn computer screen well into the night, and now it was past time for her to head back to her apartment, which meant she was bunking at the Labs. Again.

It wasn't so bad, really, staying in the tricked-out studio attached to her office and private lab, the lab in which she now sat. It was just that she'd made a New Year's Resolution to spend more nights in her two-bedroom apartment than she did at her workplace, and six months into the year, Gillian would really like to be able to start honoring that resolution. Like, anytime now.

Still, she struggled to justify a peaceful night's sleep in the comfort of her own bed while Adam was God knows where in the world, and Faraday Industries hadn't yet uncovered the mole within their ranks. So even though she had closed out the day's work—a schematic for the subfloor cooling and electrical systems in her new “passenger drone” project—Gillian continued to pore over clues leading nowhere.

Satellite footage from the Kabul Girls' School Bombing.

Flight manifests between Afghanistan and Russia for the weeks before and after the bombing.

The helicopter. Always that damn helicopter.

They needed to locate it, but Gavin's memory of its actual location was hazy. She'd started by tracking down as many of the late Karlin Kedrov's properties as possible, but Gillian had never been the whiz-kid Adam was

with the internet. Where nothing online remained sacred or locked from him, unless Gillian had a set key sequence or word search or instructions provided to her, her Google Fu was no more or less Fu-ish than your average nineties kid's.

Gavin had said the helicopter had been burned out, but if he'd been able to open up the secret compartment and get at those hidden Faraday guns, that meant the chopper might be salvageable. Not that she wanted to save it—she wanted to get at its black box.

So when the Kedrov property search grew frustrating, Gillian had switched tactics to tracking and inventorying every Faraday helicopter that had been retrofitted with the secret in-floor storage compartment. Turns out, there were a lot of helicopters out there meeting that criteria. She'd started with the choppers requisitioned by the US military, since it seemed far more likely that one of those had fallen off the radar and into enemy hands, but now, more than halfway through the list, none so far were missing.

Gillian didn't want there to be a mole in Faraday Industries. Logic dictated otherwise, with the targeting of her siblings—because it was targeting, no two ways about it, and it had to stop. It *had* to.

Shortly after Beth's ordeal, Gillian had Skyped with her younger sister, taking in the visible evidence of Beth's brutalization and wishing with everything in her that she was in their family home, too. Or that she'd visited Beth at her old condo in Chicago, in the year before this nightmare occurred. But Gillian hadn't been in physical proximity with her siblings in a long time. Only once in two years, to be precise.

She knew Beth missed her, had maybe even *needed* her while she healed. But Gillian hadn't been there, because the Labs were her priority. Normally, her conscience wouldn't twinge one bit; this wasn't simply a job, but her life's work, and what she did in the Labs was the foundation on which Faraday Industries earned not only its money but its reputation. Still...

Frowning at her primary monitor, Gillian settled her glasses higher on the bridge of her nose. Everyone thought Tobias was the loner of the family, but her quiet older brother had never let more than a few weeks pass without checking in on the rest of them, usually in person, though he'd respected Beth's need for solitude when she first quit the business. It was Gillian who played the hermit. If she was away from her work space too long, she grew



twitchy, and even though she loved her siblings, she didn't have the patience for other people, not for extended periods of time.

And besides, Tobias wasn't alone anymore. He had Chandler. During their Circle of Trust confab, Gillian had seen how he touched her, how she leaned into him—how they were a unit. Envy jabbed at Gillian's midsection. She might not be a people person, but there was a part of her that wondered what it would be like to be a one-person person.

To a certain extent she already was. Sure, there were a few hundred employees on the sprawling Labs campus most days of the week, and *technically* Gillian was their boss, and *yes*, she had meetings all the damn time with various managers who did most of the actual oversight, but she only had one friend.

Except Theo Rochon wasn't really a friend. He was her handler, the man whom the FBI had assigned as her twenty-four-seven watchdog as soon as the invisible drone she'd developed was shopped to the Department of Defense two years ago. Ever since, Theo had been her shadow, an enemy who'd morphed over time into someone who, when she didn't see him, she...missed.

He hadn't yet swung by to say goodnight. Any minute now, though. She shifted in her ergonomic rolling chair, one bare foot tucked under her leg, and leaned closer to the computer screen as she started minimizing windows and sending the helicopters she'd flagged for follow-up into a separate desktop folder. Theo didn't know about Adam's disappearance, and he certainly couldn't know about the helicopter. His loyalties were to the government, after all, not her.

He wasn't part of the Circle. And that sucked.

*Tweet-tweet.*

Gillian froze, hand hovering over the wireless mouse. No. She'd misheard. That sound hadn't occurred in forty-six days—the last time Adam had sent her a message through their encrypted thread housed on the private family-only server.

Granted, his last message had been a single link to something called “cat-bounce dot com,” subject line *Make It Rain*. Because her little brother hadn't bothered to mature past age twelve.

Swallowing hard, she drew the cursor to the shrimp-emoji icon in the lower left-hand corner of her screen, and paused. What if she clicked on it

and there *wasn't* a new message waiting for her? What if she just wanted to hear from Adam so badly, to know he was okay, that her fatigued brain had manufactured the birdlike notification sound?

“Stop being a pussy,” she whispered to herself, and double-clicked the shrimp.

NEW MESSAGE FROM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL OZ.

Yup. Twelve-year-old.

Heart racing, she opened the message, subject line *GoPro: Desert Edition*, scarcely believing Adam had made contact. Her lungs ceased to function when the video popped up to fill her entire screen.

“Heya, Gilly-Bean.” Adam’s scruffy, dirty face smiled at her through the camera—the camera someone else was holding. “Bet you didn’t think you’d hear from me, but I gotta admit, it’s not really *me* doing the talking, okay?” He nodded toward whomever held the camera, overlong brown hair falling into his tired gray eyes. “I’ve got a list of demands from my pals here, and you’re the only one who can fulfill those demands.”

A voice from behind the camera murmured something that caused Adam to glare, and Gillian hated—not for the first time—that she’d never learned Arabic, as Casey and Adam had. Even Tobias and Beth had a basic proficiency in their mother’s native tongue, but Gillian didn’t have a head for languages. “So, yeah, these dudes—whose names I’m not allowed to share—have a contract with Faraday Industries. Seems crazy, I know, but that’s what they tell me. Apparently, we reneged, and now they’re pissed.” One hand lifted to indicate his bruised jaw and split lip, and revealed bloody knuckles and what looked like a broken index finger. “Which explains why I’m here, I guess? Anyway, this ‘contract’ promised them first rights to your invisible drones, and when that left the beta stage and went live in the US, we were evidently in breach with these guys. Now they’re demanding your new project.”

Shit.

Adam shook his head, as though he’d heard her thoughts. “I don’t know how they found out about it. I swear I don’t, but they know, and it’s my life on the line.” More muttering from the man behind the camera, and whatever he said made Adam snap something back in a distinctly unhappy tone.

“Apparently, I’m rambling. The point is, they paid *someone* a huge chunk of change for the drones, and that never happened, so this contract *which I*

*have not seen—*” that was directed to the cameraman “—defaults to your next comparable development project, which they know is...yeah. So. They’re giving you until the WeaponTek showcase in September to get it to the beta stage, which you then deliver to them in Tangier, in exchange for a still-breathing version of me. They’ve agreed to send a proof-of-life video with a verifiable time stamp every week, to keep you...motivated.”

WeaponTek was only three months away, but that meant three months of Adam’s life in the balance, based entirely on something she absolutely *could not* hand over to terrorists. Terrorists who knew about the Flying Blind project.

No more room for doubt: Faraday had a mole, and one in deep with the company.

Anger turned her hands to fists as Adam kept talking. “Look, I’m kinda attached to being alive, but hey, that could change, and you’re the only one who has the right to decide who gets your work.”

*Oh, God, he’s serious.* He was telling her it was, somehow, *okay* for her to choose her technology over her brother.

She choked on a sob.

“They need an answer within two days. If you agree to their terms, you’ll need to send time-stamped photos of your work progress after every video from us. In their words,” and Adam’s voice darkened to a tone she’d never before heard from her happy-go-lucky brother, “there’s no reason this can’t be civil.”

If she didn’t agree, if she didn’t get Flying Blind to beta by the time she was supposed to go to Morocco for the conference, Gillian alone had forfeited Adam’s life. It went unsaid, but not misunderstood, that if she hadn’t agreed in two days’ time, Adam would be delivered home in a body bag—if they were lucky.

Another sob escaped, this one longer, louder, but Adam’s voice trickled through her anguish.

“It was a mistake to make the visible invisible, Gilly-Bean. I told you it was a mistake.” He smiled, wry and pained and proud—of *her*—all at the same time. “Hey, tell me something. Did my pretty little niece make it home in one p—”

The camera went dark.

Gillian shouted as the video minimized into the message, her body jerking toward the computer screen automatically. Despite logically knowing that Adam's message was only of finite length, it was like losing him all over again when the video ended and his face disappeared mid-sentence.

Footsteps sounded in the hall outside her lab, giving her only seconds to minimize the shrimp and come up with an excuse for the tears stinging her eyes and the noise she'd made. A Phillips-head screwdriver sat in the coffee cup of pens and drawing pencils beside her keyboard, and she snatched it, raking the sharp end over the heel of her palm, tearing open her skin and instantly drawing blood.

She hissed before dropping the screwdriver back in the cup, shoving her chair back and sprawling on the floor, her bleeding hand gripping the edge of a metal filing cabinet.

The door swung open. "G?" Theo's dark eyes found her awkward form behind the desk and rushed over, concern bunching his brow. "Are you all right?" He knelt next to her, pulling her injured hand from the cabinet, murmuring in sympathy as he examined the cut. "Did you fall asleep at your desk again, *cher*?"

It wouldn't have been the first time she'd crashed from chair to floor and gained a few bumps and bruises in the process, all because she had passed out while working late. "Must have," she said sheepishly, voice rusty with leftover emotion from Adam's video. "Band-Aids—"

"—are in the top drawer. I know." Of course he knew. Theo had been tending her clumsy wounds for a long time now. He swiped an antiseptic wipe over the cut, cleaning it, then ripped open a flexible square bandage and gently, so gently, applied it to her palm. His Louisiana drawl was equally soothing to her riled senses. "You're wearing pajamas already. You decided to stay here tonight?"

She glanced down, taking in her white tank top and yellow fleece lounge pants with penguins on them, and blushed, though she couldn't have said why, exactly. Theo had seen her like this a thousand times. "Yeah. Who's on duty tonight?"

"Yuri and Paolo," he said as he hauled her to her feet with one big, strong hand. "I'll let them know you're bunking here on my way out."

"Thanks."

Arching a brow, he looked down his nose at her from his considerable six-five height, one of the few men she'd met who actually managed to make her feel petite. "Our run's at six tomorrow. Don't make me wake you up."

God, she hated running. "I'll be ready." She nodded toward the door. "Go home, Theo."

He grinned, perfect white teeth flashing in the dim glow of the room as he backed away. "Go to bed, *cher*." With one final wave and a friendly, completely platonic smile, her handler disappeared into the hall.

Gillian waited until she heard the elevator ding and the automated voice inform that the doors were closing before she moved. Lunging for her chair, she yanked it to the desk and clicked open the shrimp, breaths sawing in and out as she typed her message.

VIDEOS MUST ARRIVE ON MONDAY BY 9AM PACIFIC TIME.  
ONE MINUTE LATE, AND WE'RE GOING TO HAVE PROBLEMS.  
*Send.*

Time to get to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# *Life in Death: The Faraday Story*

by T.S. Marcus, PhD

*(A Comprehensive Examination of  
America's First Warmongering Family)  
Library of Congress Classification Number:  
EJ3369.V22 T101 2014*

## Part III: The Business of Bloodshed (excerpt)

[...] In February 1866, family patriarch Richard Faraday sat down with the president of the United States, Andrew Johnson, to discuss what should be done with the massive stockpile of weaponry that had built up following Faraday Manufactory's decision to stop selling to the Union and Confederate armies in the final months of the American Civil War. By all accounts, Faraday wished to destroy the weapons, melt them down and recycle the materials into the company's public works production lines—locomotives, shipyards, railways, city infrastructure. The war had torn the country apart, and Faraday didn't want to play any role in further destruction, only the rebuilding efforts.

President Johnson, on the other hand made an offer to purchase the entire stock, for what at the time was an outrageous price. While the Manufactory—and the Faradays, by extension—outearned any other industrial competitor of that era, the consensus seems to be that it was less the value of the offer than who made it. By the end of the meeting, Faraday had not only agreed to supply the U.S. government with the warehouse of unsold weapons, but signed a contract to continue producing weapons—solely for the government. No private consumers would be able to purchase a Faraday firearm, thus easing Richard Faraday's concern about the perpetuation of violence.

For many years, this change in policy had a non-effect on Faraday business practices. Manufacturing continued at a fast clip, employment growing apace with industrial demand. The Manufactory expanded to accommodate its market leadership, opening facilities along the eastern

seaboard and establishing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they were *the* force to be reckoned with, when it came to money and power in the healing United States.

Soon enough, other countries came knocking, hoping for a piece of the engineering frontrunner's pie. Richard's eldest daughter, Amelia, had essentially taken control of company management, though her younger brother, Marcus, conducted all public-facing business, as females of the time remained widely disregarded as capitalistic forces of nature. The unmarried Amelia had attended medical school and wished to shift the company focus from simple production on a mass scale, as they were in the late 1880s, to innovation, with manufacturing outsourced to vetted contractors and steelworks.

For all of Amelia's plans, though, she was thwarted at every turn by Marcus. From Amelia's personal diaries—which were donated to the Library of Congress under the directive of her last will and testament—it is apparent that Marcus conducted closed-door meetings with foreign dignitaries and industrialists, forging agreements for expansion into European soil that not only circumvented Amelia's strategic vision, but violated the contract Richard and President Johnson had executed in 1866.

Marcus was able to hide his under-the-table dealings until 1890, when he contracted enteric fever—otherwise known as typhoid—assumedly from the excessive amount of time he spent in the extremely unhygienic Boston neighborhoods frequented by prostitutes. During that time, Amelia kept his appointments and made rare appearances as the public face of the company, when it became apparent that Marcus had “misbehaved,” to quote one of Amelia's diary entries from those months.

Amelia immediately went into disaster-prevention mode, cancelled the agreements with foreign partners before true production and distribution could begin overseas, and contacted the U.S. Secretary of State, James G. Blaine. From Amelia's diary:

*Today, I was forced to apologize. It is strange, I now realize, that I have gone so long without apologizing, and that I have grown quite comfortable with not doing so. By holding a position of power, I have negated the woman-ness of my form that socially compels me*

*to be apologetic, even given situations wherein nothing I have done necessitates an apology.*

*Oh, how I have enjoyed this freedom from “sorry”! And now my beloved brother has made it so that a “sorry” was inevitable.*

*Secretary Blaine was a gentleman, of course—an individual of his stature and political longevity understands the nuance of delicate discourse. He did not force me to grovel, though I will admit, I felt the need to do so (I quelled that need, Diary, never fear). Instead, we together reviewed the terms of Father’s initial agreement and closed any potential loophole a future Faraday—never again Marcus—might think to exploit.*

*For the next 50 years, we will be held to the highest and most singular of standards: those of the sitting President of the United States, whomever he may be, and subject to his dictates in stocking our country’s armory.*

When the Spanish-American War began in 1898, the United States was prepared. The naval battles waged were triumphant in large part due to the technological advances that had been applied to battleship weaponry, courtesy of the newest—and unknown to the public—branch of the Faraday company: the Division of Martial Ontogeny. The DMO was the first department of Faraday Industries to operate solely in the shadows, known only to a particular subset of Faraday employees and certain high-ranking government officials.

Marcus Faraday had no role in the development of the DMO (though he did survive his brush with typhoid), and neither did any other male Faraday. Amelia, with her distaste for apologizing, channeled her drive for scientific innovation into the creation of the DMO—her brainchild, her dominion—and it is from that point forward that the Faradays’ moral high ground began to crumble beneath their feet.



To discover more titles by Edie Harris, please visit her website at [edieharris.com](http://edieharris.com), where you can read free stories, sign up for her newsletter and more.

Look for *Thrilled*, the next book in the Blood Money series, coming from Edie Harris and Carina Press in October 2016.

No engineer alive can do what Gillian Faraday does in her California lab, and her newest weaponry project is poised to take the tech world by storm. Only one problem: a deadly enemy is demanding the prototype in exchange for her brother's life.

For months, Gillian has kept this secret, racing to beat the clock and save the youngest member of their family. Her FBI handler, however, knows she's keeping something from him—something big—especially when Gillian escapes from under his ever-watchful eye.

Agent Theo Rochon can't believe he's chasing the woman who has become his best friend halfway across the world. He isn't prepared for what happens when he catches up with her, or for anger and distrust to turn to searing heat.

Gillian is determined to save her brother, but Theo refuses to compromise his asset's safety. Together, they set out to finish a dangerous game that can only end in blood.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## **Acknowledgments**

I could not tell these stories without the assistance and support of two invaluable women—my mother, Nancy, and my editor, Kerri. Thank you for your patience and understanding, your editorial knowledge and your challenging critiques. You force me to be a better writer, and for that I am forever grateful.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**Also available from Edie Harris  
and Carina Press**

*[Blamed: Blood Money Book One](#)*

*[Ripped: Blood Money Book Two](#)*

**And coming soon**

*[Thrilled: Blood Money Book Four](#)*

*[Locked: Blood Money Book Five](#)*

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

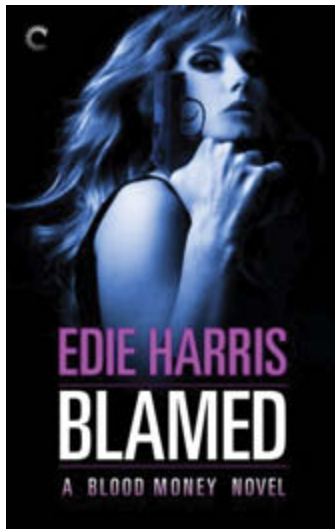
## **About the Author**

Edie Harris is the author of cinematic, compelling, James Bond-esque romantic suspense. She studied English and Creative Writing at the University of Iowa. During the day, she does corporate things and subsists on caffeine and pastries. Her nights, however, belong to the world of romance fiction. Edie lives and works in Chicago.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



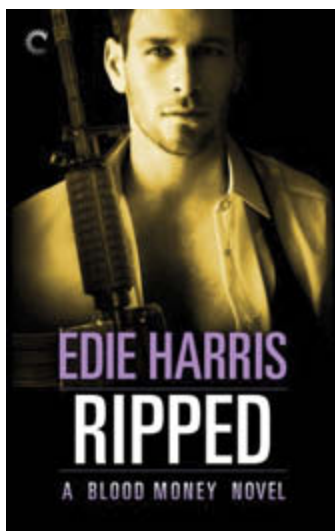
***Blood Money* follows the lives and loves of Faraday Industries—a family of spies and sanctioned killers. Meet them all today!**



**[BLAMED: A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL](#) *A Blood Money Novel, book one***

**“One of the best romances I’ve read all year.”—*SmartBitches, Trashy Books***

**Beth Faraday, a former assassin who wants nothing more than to stay retired, finds her new life turning anything but normal when sexy British spy and ghost from her past Raleigh Vick shows up in Chicago, determined to protect her from the bounty that’s been placed on her head.**



**RIPPED: A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL** *A Blood Money Novel, book two*

**“Gritty, intense and filled to the brim with suspense and intrigue, this romantic suspense series has me hooked.”—*Fiction Vixen***

**A sexy, hot-blooded spy coerces an ice-cold attorney to partner with him to wreak vengeance on the villain who threatens them both.**



***Blood Money* continues with THRILLED: A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL and LOCKED: A BLOOD MONEY NOVEL!**

Connect with us for info on our new releases, access to exclusive offers and much more!

Visit [CarinaPress.com](http://CarinaPress.com)

We like you—why not like us on Facebook: [Facebook.com/CarinaPress](https://Facebook.com/CarinaPress)

Follow us on Twitter: [Twitter.com/CarinaPress](https://Twitter.com/CarinaPress)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



When there's danger lurking, count on the *Men of Midnight* to save the day.



**MIDNIGHT VENGEANCE** *The Men of Midnight*, book one

**“A long-awaited return to Lisa Marie Rice’s beloved *Midnight* series.”—*Fresh Fiction***

**Morton “Jacko” Jackman isn’t afraid of anything. He’s a former Navy SEAL sniper, and he’s been in more firefights than most people have had hot meals. Lauren Dare scares him. Gorgeous, talented and refined, she’s the type of woman who could never be interested in a guy like him. So he’s loved her fiercely in secret. Until now.**





**MIDNIGHT PROMISES** *The Men of Midnight, book two*

**“I’d highly recommend MIDNIGHT PROMISES to any romantic suspense reader. You won’t be able to put it down.”—*Harlequin Junkie blog*, Top Pick Felicity Ward is no stranger to secrets. Raised in the Witness Protection Program, her whole childhood was a lie. But she couldn’t have known that her family’s secrets—secrets she didn’t even know she was keeping—could spark a nuclear war. And nothing could have prepared her for the tough, sexy warrior who first saves her life and then vows to protect it, no matter what.**



**MIDNIGHT SECRETS** *The Men of Midnight, book three*

**“Every now and then a book falls in my lap that keeps me up all night. MIDNIGHT SECRETS did that exactly!”—*Bitten by Love Reviews***

**Former Navy SEAL Joe Harris nearly died—twice—on a medevac helo after being blown up by an IED. He’s not moving too great these days, but if there was ever a woman designed to jump-start a man’s hormones, it would be his new neighbor. Meeting Isabel—loving Isabel—brought Joe back to life, and he’s not going to let anyone take her from him, not even a high-powered politician who needs to keep Isabel from remembering what he’s done.**



**[MIDNIGHT FIRE](#) *The Men of Midnight, book four***

**The boy Summer Redding loved and thought dead is back—now he’s a hardened warrior, a man out for revenge, and he’ll fight to the death to protect what is his, and that includes her. Connect with us for info on our new releases, access to exclusive offers and much more!**

**Connect with us for info on our new releases, access to exclusive offers and much more!**

**Visit [CarinaPress.com](http://CarinaPress.com)**

**We like you—why not like us on Facebook: [Facebook.com/CarinaPress](https://Facebook.com/CarinaPress)**

Follow us on Twitter: [Twitter.com/CarinaPress](https://twitter.com/CarinaPress)

[OceanofPDF.com](https://OceanofPDF.com)

*Addicted to shows like Law & Order and The Blacklist?*

*Can't get enough of authors like Kendra Elliot & Tess Gerritsen?*

You'll love... .

## ***TOUGH JUSTICE***

***Justice is worth every sacrifice.***

A brand-new 8-part reading experience starting January 12, 2016!

FBI agent Lara Grant has finally put her life as an undercover operative behind her and started a new assignment in New York City. But her past and present collide and become ever more twisted as a spate of murders sends a message that is cruelly, chillingly personal...

**[Tough Justice: Exposed](#) (Part 1 of 8) by *New York Times* bestselling author Carla Cassidy**

**[Tough Justice: Watched](#) (Part 2 of 8) by Tyler Anne Snell**

**[Tough Justice: Burned](#) (Part 3 of 8) by Carol Ericson**

**[Tough Justice: Trapped](#) (Part 4 of 8) by Gail Barrett**

**[Tough Justice: Twisted](#) (Part 5 of 8) by Gail Barrett**

**[Tough Justice: Ambushed](#) (Part 6 of 8) by Carol Ericson**

**[Tough Justice: Betrayed](#) (Part 7 of 8) by Tyler Anne Snell**

**[Tough Justice: Hunted](#) (Part 8 of 8) by *New York Times* bestselling author Carla Cassidy**

Collect all 8!

Visit [www.ToughJusticeSeries.com](http://www.ToughJusticeSeries.com) for more information.

[www.ToughJusticeSeries.com](http://www.ToughJusticeSeries.com)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**Signing up for our FREE eNewsletter is quick and easy!**

Get the latest information from Carina Press, PLUS get access to members-only EXCLUSIVE deals and coupons! As an eNewsletter subscriber, you'll get the inside scoop on everything Carina Press and be the first to know about our newest releases!

DON'T MISS OUT! Sign up now! [CarinaPress.com/Newsletter](http://CarinaPress.com/Newsletter)

**Connect with us for info on our new releases, access to exclusive offers and much more!**

Visit [CarinaPress.com](http://CarinaPress.com)

We like you—why not like us on Facebook: [Facebook.com/CarinaPress](http://Facebook.com/CarinaPress)

Follow us on Twitter: [Twitter.com/CarinaPress](http://Twitter.com/CarinaPress)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



We think you have a good book in you!

Do you write in the below genres? Harlequin's Carina Press wants to see your manuscript.

- Contemporary Romance
  - Romantic Suspense
  - Historical Romance
  - Paranormal Romance
    - Mystery
    - Erotic Romance
    - LGBT
- Science Fiction & Fantasy Submit today! *All manuscripts receive a thorough evaluation by a Carina Press editor and a decision within 12–16 weeks. What do you have to lose?*

To learn more about our submission guidelines, visit us at [CarinaPress.com](http://CarinaPress.com).

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



ISBN-13: 9781426899393

Crazed: A Blood Money Novel

Copyright © 2016 by Edie Harris

All rights reserved. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office and in other countries.

[www.CarinaPress.com](http://www.CarinaPress.com)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)